

Return of the Queen by JoMo3

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Summary:

Eleven's time in the Upside Down, how she gets back to her friends, and adjusting to life.

1. Out of the Dark

Author's Note:

So, I'm trying something different. This is my more "serious" piece, and won't be as fluffy as things I've written in the past. Though it will get fluffier as the story goes on.

Day 1

Dark.

Cold.

Mike?

These were the first three thoughts that came to Eleven as her eyes opened. The struggle to do that was itself too much of an effort, and she closed them again.

She awoke again some time later, slower this time. Everything hurt. She could taste the familiar tang of blood on her upper lip. Her head felt as if she had slammed it into a door a bunch of times. And she was so *tired* .

All she wanted to do was to close her eyes again, but upon opening them, those three words came back to her:

Dark.

Cold.

Mike?

Slowly sitting up, despite the pain that spread throughout her body as she did so, she realized where she was: The Upside Down.

She was still in the room where she'd been with the boys, the room

where she had defeated the Demogorgon. But everything was gray. There were thick vines covering the room and small white flakes fell from above. And it was cold. So very cold.

So cold that she pulled the parka she'd been given by the other man...Hopper?...tightly around her, but that did little to abate the chill she felt.

"M...Mike?" she barely choked out. Her throat was throbbing with pain; the effort behind whispering his name was enough to make her want to remain silent for a while.

She knew he probably couldn't hear her, but she thought maybe the boys were still in this room.

Sighing, she tried again. "M..ike?" No response.

Using most of her strength, she pulled herself to her feet. As she did so, her foot brushed something. When she turned to see what it was, a gasp escaped her throat.

The Demogorgon lay next to her, motionless. She scooted away from it, panting in fear. When it didn't move, she kicked at it with her foot; it remained unmoving.

She looked around the gray room, with its overturned desks and dark school supplies, and felt the first tear fall from her eyes as the realization hit her. *She was here. In the Upside Down. With no way out.*

Curling into a ball, she cried until there were no more tears, and she drifted off to sleep.

Day 4

It took her a few days to find something to eat. At first, she tried to eat some of the cold and gray food that she found in the Upside Down; the "putting" was still in the room where Dustin had dumped it, but it tasted like ash in her mouth, causing her to vomit.

She tried taking a bite out of a slug she found, but that caused her

stomach to turn, and she threw that up, as well.

Eventually, while wandering, she found a lone box in the middle of the dark, gray trees. The box had a small container inside, with food. *Actual* food. She ate all of it in one sitting.

Day 5

A visit to the box the next day yielded nothing, and she was back to wandering in the darkness.

Day 9

After a while, she noticed that while there may not be food in the box *every* day, it would be there more often than not. She also learned to restrain herself, no matter how ravenous she was, so she wouldn't eat all of the food at one time. Sometimes there would be Eggo's in it, which she would savor with every bite. She never gave much thought to where the food was coming from, she was just happy to get it.

Day 20

Every so often, she would try to use her powers. To see if she could transport herself back, or to move something. At first, all she got in return was a headache and a bloody nose; the first few times she would collapse in exhaustion. After a while (she lost track of days) she was able to push a vine, *barely* . But that alone left her dizzy and her head pounding.

Day 33

She was able to find Mike's house. She padded down to the basement, and found the blanket fort; only now it was cold and wet. It looked more like a dark and foreboding cave, instead of the comfortable tent

she had come to enjoy. Lying down in it didn't do anything but make her feel even colder.

Day 36

Despite the wetness and the cold, she managed to stay in Mike's basement for a few days, hoping she would hear his voice, and this day she could, but just barely.

Mike: I don't want to go upstairs, Lucas. It's stupid.

Lucas: Mike, come on, it's New Year's Eve. We always do the countdown.

Mike: I know, I just...I don't feel like doing it.

Lucas: It's...

The voices started growing fainter, and no matter how much she concentrated, and ignored the blood dripping from her nose, she couldn't hear anything else. Exhausted, she fell asleep.

Day 37

Later, after waking, she focused really hard, and was able to hear voices for a few minutes:

Dustin: No, Lucas, don't do fireball. It won't....(static)

Lucas: Come on, come, on, yes! I.... (static)

Mike: You defeat the Thessalhydra, and emerge.... (static)

Despite the toll it took on her, and despite the emptiness surrounding her, Eleven couldn't help but smile; she could hear her friends again. Concentrating even harder, she softly murmured, "Mike?"

Mike: Did you guys hear that?

A voice she didn't recognize: Hear what?

Mike: It sounded like....

She couldn't concentrate anymore, all of the effort exhausting her, and she collapsed.

Day 38

When she woke up, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hear anything.

Day 44

After not being able to hear anything for a few days, she decided it was time to move on. Besides her daily trips to the box in the woods, she had remained in Mike's basement, hoping she would be able to hear someone or something.

Today on her way to the box, it seemed darker than usual in what passed as the sky. She didn't think too much of it until she opened the box, and saw that there wasn't any food. All of a sudden, it felt even colder, if that were possible.

Feeling her heart race, she turned around and her eyes widened. Standing a little ways away from her was a creature; it didn't look like the Demogorgon. This one had small beady eyes, and stood on all fours, glaring at her.

She stood, unmoving, trying to catch her breath as she debated what to do. Unfortunately, the beast made up its mind, and charged at her, letting out a roar that she could feel in her bones.

She put her hand out, and mustered all of the power she could in her small body; the beast halted, and let out a whimper.

Concentrating even harder, despite the pounding in her head and the blood on her lips, she twisted its neck, dropping it to the ground,

sending a layer of gray into the air.

Feeling her power drained, she, too, collapsed.

Day 45

When she awoke, it took her a few minutes to recall what had happened, but when she saw the creature, she remembered. *Not alone*, she thought to herself.

After standing, she checked the box, and felt a weak smile come to her face when she saw the wrapped food, with Eggo's on top. Despite her promise to make the food last, using her abilities yesterday had depleted her, so she ate everything.

Day 60

Over the next few days, she spent time cautiously going to the box and minding her surroundings. She didn't come across any other creatures.

By now her body had adjusted to being cold all of the time. Her body had also began to change, as she noticed her hair, the hair that Papa was always cutting close to her head, now reached her ears. Despite how dirty and dry it was, it felt nice to be able to grow it out.

She was getting taller, too. The pale pink dress the boys had given her still fit, but by now was a shade of brown, having been worn for so long, as well as ripped and tattered; both from her growing and for getting stuck on vines and trees.

Day 83

She had just left the box, and was putting food into her pocket, when she heard something crunch behind her. Looking over her shoulder,

she saw another creature, this one different than the last. This creature had a long, pointed head, as well as six legs. Frightened, she scurried behind a tree as the creature slowly walked past without noticing her.

She watched it until she couldn't see it anymore; then, letting out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding, she quickly walked away.

Day 91

She went back to Mike's basement. She tried and tried, but couldn't hear anything.

Day 93

When she returned from the box, she sat in the cold, wet fort and ate some Eggos. Without really trying, she could hear voices again:

Mike: Holly, get out of the fort.

A small child's voice: Nuh-unh!

A woman's voice: Mike, you need to take that down.

Mike: Mom, I...I can't.

The woman: Well, I.... (static)

Eleven popped the last piece of Eggo into her mouth, and concentrated harder.

The woman:.....going to have to come down sometime, Michael.

Mike: Okay, mom, but not today.

The woman: Come on, Holly.

There was silence for a few moments, then El heard something soft. It almost sounded like...crying.

She concentrated even harder, ignoring the blood she could already taste on her upper lip. She noticed something out of the corner of her eye, a light, almost.

Mike: What the hell...

Eleven turned; it was a gray, empty lamp that sat in the Wheeler's Upside Down basement. Focusing her attention on it, she pushed with her mind, and saw the lamp flicker a short burst of light.

Mike: El? Is...is that you?

Her head was spinning, but she pushed even harder, making the lamp faintly flicker two times.

Mike: El? Where are you? Are you...

But she couldn't focus anymore, and she passed out on the wet ground.

Day 94

Still exhausted from yesterday's efforts, she slept almost the entire day.

Day 95

Faint voices woke her up:

Mike: I'm telling you, she's here.

Lucas: Mike...

Mike: Lucas, I'm serious. The lamp, it was, like, flickering on and off.

Dustin: Mental.

A boy's voice she didn't recognize: He might be telling the truth, guys. When I was...gone, I was able to do stuff with the lights.

Eleven sat up. Was that Will?

Mike: Just give it a minute. El! El, are you here?

She still felt weak, but she wanted to come through for Mike. Concentrating on the lamp, she was able to make it flicker.

Mike: Look! Did you see that?

Lucas: It's probably just the electricity, man. Come on.

Mike: No, it wasn't. El! Do it again!

Lucas: Stop screaming, your mom's gonna think you're crazy.

She focused again, and was able to make the lamp flicker.

Mike: See!

Dustin: Maybe...

Eleven smiled, wiping the blood away from her nose. Weakly, she said, "Mike?"

No response.

She tried to concentrate on the lamp again, but felt herself getting dizzy. A minute later, she couldn't hear their voices anymore.

Day 102

She spent the next few days trying to hear something; besides a barely audible murmur every so often, she couldn't hear anything.

Day 111

She had come back and was napping in the fort when she heard something, clearly this time; it was definitely someone crying.

Mike: El? Where are you?

“Mike?” she said.

Mike: If you’re there, just...give me a sign.

“Mike..” she said, a little louder. She tried to concentrate on the lamp, but she couldn’t get it to flicker.

She was about to try again when she heard a *crunch* nearby, and a sound she hadn’t heard before. Sitting up, she looked around her, but saw nothing but the gray and the white flakes surrounding her. She was turning back to the lamp when she heard it again, the sound, closer this time. She started to stand when the wall behind her crashed into her, and she was knocked off her feet.

Standing before her was the creature she had seen, the one with many legs. It’s head turned, surveying the wreckage before it. Eleven was hidden behind some of the gray debris, and it couldn’t see her.

Staying still, she watched as it moved around, looking at the room, before it turned and scuttled away.

She didn’t move for a very long time.

Day 112

When she woke up, she tried again to make the lamp, which now lay on its side, flicker. It didn’t work.

She tried saying Mike’s name; nothing.

She spent most of her time listening for a voice: nothing.

Day 145

She began to start living/hiding in the bus she had gone to with the boys, where she had made Lucas fly through the air. She took what

she could manage from the destroyed fort, and slept on one of the seats.

She hadn't seen the creature in a while, and she hoped it remained that way.

Day 173

Every so often she would walk to Mike's and try to communicate with him, but nothing came of it. She would sit in the basement and listen, or wander to his room. She would sit on his bed and try to remember the good week she'd had, the best of her life. She started to wonder if this, this gray, empty nothingness, would be the rest of her life.

Day 184

She fell asleep on the bed in Mike's room, trying once again to talk to him. She could hear whispers, but she wasn't able to tell what they were saying, no matter how hard she tried.

Day 201

She spent the next few days walking around Upside Down Hawkins; on this day she found the quarry, where she'd saved Mike from falling to his death. She stood on the same cliff he did, and half considered jumping. Instead she walked down to the bottom and tested the water. It was inky, sticky, and repugnant. She stayed away.

Day 225

She was leaving the box (no food today) when she heard a rustling behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she once again saw the multi-legged creature, coming her way. This time she tried to fight.

Holding out her hand, she concentrated on it. The creature stopped moving, and roared as it tried to escape her confinements. She slowly backed away, blood dripping from her nose with the effort, but the creature remained still. Not paying attention, she tripped over a log and lost her focus, which sent the creature barreling down on her. She let out a gasp as it descended on her, but was surprised when another creature came from nowhere and attacked it, going for one of its legs. She scooted away as the two dueled it out. The six-legged creature easily defeated this new one, then its head swiveled as it looked for Eleven. Not seeing her, it turned and went away.

Day 226

Fearful of what may happen, she stayed away from the box.

Day 230

Starving, she went to the box and found two containers of food. Scooping them up, she hurried back to the bus.

Day 279

She was walking around in Hawkin's woods when the creature found her again.

She had been to the box already, and was walking home when she heard the growl of the beast. It came scurrying after her. She ran, her tattered dress ripping even more in the process as it got snagged on dead tree branches. But no matter how fast she ran, the creature kept up with her, its bellow scaring her.

Finally she turned around and, despite the headache and nosebleed it gave her, concentrated on the creature.

It stopped, and she twisted her own neck, causing the creature's head to spin 180 degrees. Its bellow stopped, and, as she released her hold

on it, it dropped to the ground, dead.

Feeling drained, she ambled back to the bus and crashed.

In the days after, she didn't come across any creature.

Day 322

After getting and eating the food from the box, she tried to explore places she hadn't been too yet. She was walking through Mirkwood when she saw her old "home." The lab. It reminded her that the Gate-the very one she had opened-was inside. Curious to see if it was still open, she reluctantly went inside.

She walked down the hallway, the darkness of it making her shiver. She found a locked door but, using her abilities, opened it; and suddenly, it was as if she were back "home."

She saw hallways she remembered, as well as rooms she had spent time in. She found her room, with the dirty, gray lion. She put it into one of the ripped pockets on the parka she still wore.

Cautiously, she continued down a flight of stairs to the room with the "bath." Inside, she found it; the gate, pulsing, moaning. She stopped and stared at it.

What if this didn't work? What if it didn't go anywhere?

Regardless, her feet started moving towards it. When she was less than an inch away, she took a deep breath and put one of her arms in. When nothing happened, she took another breath, and stepped through, hoping to find Hawkins-and Mike-on the other side.

2. Into the Light

Stepping all of the way through, Eleven looked around at her new surroundings. She was *supposed* to be back in Hawkins, but this...she wasn't sure this was Hawkins.

It looked like the lab, but there were those white flakes, still floating in the air. And the vines that started behind her were spread throughout the large room.

She stopped, confused; was this right?

Carefully, almost tiptoeing, she walked away from the gate. She exited the room she was in, and looked down the hallway. She still wasn't a hundred percent sure she was back. The hallway looked similar to the room she had just been in; the gray spread to this part of the building, too.

She kept walking, slowly, down the hallway. She saw doors at the end, the doors that led to the moving floor that she would get on with Papa. The floor that would bring her down here when they took her to the bath. She stood where she was, staring at it, when suddenly, lights started flashing and the door to the moving floor lit up.

She gasped; she was back.

Almost immediately, she ran to one of the empty rooms on her right, hiding in the shadows. She heard the doors open, and voices talking as people rushed down the hallway.

"Where is it?"

"Do you see anything?"

"Call Dr. Owens, it may be a false alarm."

She stayed put until she could hear the voices and their footsteps recede. After waiting a few moments after, she stood from her hiding place and went back to the hallway.

The lights were still flashing, but the doors stayed dark and unmoving.

She slowly walked back up the hallway and paused when she got to the stairs. Looking around her, she went up them to the next floor.

When she got to the floor, she could tell she wasn't in the Upside Down anymore; she could see colors and lights, something that had been absent during her near year away. The lights blinded her at first, and she had to squint as she walked down the hallway.

She had only taken a few steps when the lights on this floor began to flash as well. It hurt her eyes, and she turned to find somewhere to go, but instead turned right into a wall, hitting her head and falling down.

When she awoke, her surroundings were all too familiar: she was in her old room.

Nothing had changed, although there wasn't much to change in the first place. The picture she had drawn of her and Papa were still there, as well as the pitcher of water and paper cups. Her lion, the one thing that had kept her company during the lonely nights, was there. She reached into her ripped parka pocket and pulled out the lion she had found in the Upside Down. She tossed it against the wall.

She also noticed she couldn't move much. There was something new on her bed—a strap that was wrapped around her waist. She shook, trying to free herself, but nothing happened. She attempted to use her telepathy to free herself, but still, nothing happened.

The door opened, and a man walked inside. He mumbled something into a radio—it almost looked like Mike's Supercomm—then put it on the stand by her bed. Smiling, he glanced at Eleven. "Hello, there, Jane."

She squinted in confusion; who was Jane?

Pulling over a chair, he sat down, a folder in his hand. "How are you feeling?"

She didn't answer.

He turned some papers. "Yeah, it says here you're not the most...vocal person in the world." He gave her another smile, but she didn't respond.

"My name is Doctor Owens, Jane. Can I trust you enough that I can take these restraints off you?" he asked, nodding towards the strap on her waist. She still didn't say anything.

He sighed. "Well, okay, then," he said, beginning to get up and leave.

"No."

He turned around. "What was that?"

"No," she repeated quietly.

He sat back down in the chair. "No, what?"

"Trust," she said, nodding towards the strap.

He sighed. "Can I trust you, Jane?"

"Yes."

Giving her another smile, he undid the strap. Cautiously, she scooted herself up in the bed, her back against the wall as she looked at him, not sure what to think.

He sat back down. "Let's try this again, hm? My name is Henry Owens. Do you know where we are, Jane?"

She shook her head.

"We are at Hawk.."

"No."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

Pointing at herself, she said, "Eleven."

Confused, he turned a few pages in the file he had. Getting to a certain page, he let out a silent “oh.”

“Of course,” he continued. “Eleven. Sorry.” He sighed. “My predecessor, Dr. Brenner...”

Papa?

“...his notes are all jumbled. I forgot you went by ‘Eleven’ and not Jane.” Giving her another smile, he continued. “Anyway, I’m Doctor Henry Owens. I’ve taken over here at Hawkins Lab, to fix some of the things Dr. Brenner got wrong. And you, young lady,” he said, pointing at her, “Are at the top of my list.”

She scrunched her face in confusion.

Leaning forward in his chair, he said, “How would you like to go home?”

She raised her eyebrows. Home? Mike?

“Do you want to see your mother again?”

She was confused. A mother?

When she didn’t respond, he asked, “Do you want to go home, Eleven?”

Without hesitation, she answered, “Yes.”

“Good. That is my intention. Um...” he flipped through a few more pages. “It might be a couple of days, okay? I need to talk to some people, and I need to talk to you about where you’ve been. Do you think you’ll be up for that?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He stood up. “Well, how about we talk tomorrow, hm? I’ll get you some food, and then you can get some rest, and we can talk tomorrow. Now is there anything else you need?” He picked up his radio, and went to the door.

“Super..comm,” she said.

He turned around. “Sorry?”

She pointed to the radio in his hand.

“Oh, one of these,” he said, his face looking worried. “Um, I don’t think we have one to give you, Eleven.”

She frowned.

Dr. Owens sighed. “I’ll see what I can do, okay?” When she nodded, he smiled. “Okay.” And with that, he left.

Soon after, someone came in with a tray of food, similar to what she used to eat. Despite the blandness of it, she wolfed it down within a matter of minutes.

There was also a small pill that they made her take with a cup of water. She was hesitant at first, but Dr. Owens knelt next to her bed, and told her “You’ve been gone a long time, Eleven. And if you were where I think you were, your body isn’t a hundred percent healthy. This will help you.” She’d nodded and swallowed the pill.

Before she went to sleep, Dr. Owens snuck back into the room, hands behind his back and a smile on his face. “I got you something,” he said, putting his hands in front of him and revealing a walkie.

She gave a small smile as she accepted it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, giving her another smile. “Good night.”

When he left, she fiddled with the knobs on the walkie. This one was smaller than Mike’s, but unlike Mike’s it wasn’t making any sounds. Sighing, she put it on the bedside table and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning brought another tray of food with another pill for her to take. Dr. Owens came in when she finished eating and asked if

he could talk to her. She nodded.

“Can you describe where you were?”

“Describe?”

He sighed. “Tell me about where you were.”

“Upside Down.”

He wrote it on a clipboard. “What do you mean?”

She didn’t know how else to explain it. She added, “Dark. Gray. Scary.”

He wrote those words down as well. “Okay. What did you see?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer. “M-monster.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I see. Can you tell me what it looked like?”

She thought about that. Counting on her fingers, she answered, “Six legs.”

“Hm.”

She sighed, getting tired of the questions already.

He saw her frustration. “How about I come back a little later and ask, okay?”

She nodded, and he left.

The afternoon brought more questions that she could barely answer, and another pill for her to take. She swallowed it down without asking any questions, which made Dr. Owens smile. He brought her some food and another stuffed animal to sleep with.

On the third day, after she had eaten what passed as breakfast and swallowed her pill, Dr. Owens took her to another room to talk to her.

Walking down the hallway with him, she asked, “Going home?”

He smiled, and said, “No, not yet. But soon, I promise.”

They then spent the next hour with him asking more questions about the Upside Down, but her answers were similar to what she had said yesterday.

When they finished, and they got back to her room, she held up the walkie. “Broken,” she said.

He picked it up, turned it in his hands. “Huh. How about that. Let me see if I can find you a new one, okay?” He put the broken one back on her nightstand.

He left, and soon after, another tray of food was brought in with another pill. She ate the food first, while the orderly watched. When she finished, she held the tray up for him to take, but he shook his head, and pointed at the untouched pill.

“Take it,” he said.

She nodded, picked up the pill, put it into her mouth, and downed a small cup of water. The orderly nodded, took the tray, and left.

A few moments after the door was closed, she turned onto her side, so her back was to the camera in the room. Cupping her hand, she spat the pill into it, and tucked it under the mattress.

She repeated this when they came in the next morning. When Dr. Owens came back in to talk, instead she held her stomach and made a face, saying, “Sick.”

“Oh. Well, I can come back later, okay?”

She nodded, and he stepped out of the room.

She closed her eyes for a little bit, but when he came back and asked if she was ready to talk, she’d replied “Not today.”

He nodded. "Okay, but tomorrow we need to talk, okay? I want to get you back home, and the faster we can talk, the sooner I can get you home to your mother, okay?"

"Yes."

"Good," he'd said with a smile.

They brought her in another tray of food with a pill. Once again, she ate the food and pretended to swallow the pill, spitting it into her hand once they left.

Knowing she was free for the night, she turned off her light and picked up the still-not working walkie. Turning it on, she heard nothing. But this time, she concentrated, and was able to hear static. Ignoring the blood she felt from her nose, she focused harder and pretty soon was able to pick up something.

Dr. Owen's voice: I didn't get anything from her today.

Someone else: You've got to keep pressing her, Henry.

Dr. Owens: I'm trying, okay? I got her to trust me. I gave her that damn broken radio, and she thinks she's going home. As long as she trusts me, everything will be okay. She's only been back a few days. Give her some time to come out of her shell.

The other person: I hope so. We've spent too much money and time on her. Brenner was just scratching the surface. We need to see how much further she can go.

Dr. Owens: Do you want me to stop giving her those pills?

The other person: No. Brenner's notes said she could be violent at times. We don't want another repeat of that. Keep feeding her the pills for now, they'll keep her abilities away until we know what to do with her, or where we'll ship her to.

Eleven gasped.

The other person: Did you hear something?

She clicked off the radio and put it back on her nightstand. Turning to her back, she concentrated on the paper cups that sat on a nearby table. The cups slowly lifted into the air. She removed one from the stack and sailed it over to her, placing it on her nightstand. Wiping away the blood, she got under the covers and went to sleep.

The next few days were the same; wake up, eat, “take” the pill, answer questions, repeat. Whenever she would ask about “home,” Dr. Owens would give her a smile and tell her, “Soon, Eleven. Just a few more days.”

A few nights after she’d gotten the walkie to work, she overheard a few more things:

The other person: Anything new?

Dr. Owens: No, same old same old.

The other person: We need to get her ready for the next phase.

Dr. Owens: So you want me to stop giving her the pills?

The other person: Not yet. How are your interactions with her going?

Dr. Owens: Still good. She keeps asking about going home.

The other person: I thought you said she trusted you.

Dr. Owens: She does, but...

The other person: You should have never mentioned home to her.

Dr. Owens: So what do you want me to say when she asks?

The other person: Keep lying. Eventually we’re going to have to

convince her that *this* is her home.

She clicked off.

Two days later they brought her into another room with a table. But something felt different to her.

Dr. Owens sat across from her, and another man, this one tall and with no hair on top of his head, joined him. Dr. Owens didn't look as happy as he usually did, and the new man looked upset, like Papa sometimes looked.

Behind her stood a guard with a gun on his belt. The whole situation made Eleven nervous.

"Eleven," Dr. Owens said, folding his hands in front of him, "This is Dr. Berger. He's here to help us today. Is that alright?"

Eleven looked at Berger, then at Owens, then at the table in front of her. She nodded her head.

"I wanted to ask you some questions," Dr. Berger said, still unsmiling. "This place you went to, this... 'Upside Down,' as you call it. Were you the only living thing there?"

She shook her head. She'd already answered this question with Dr. Owens.

"Who...or what else did you see?" he asked.

"Monsters."

He snorted. "Right. Monsters. How long were you there?"

She had no idea, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't lie to me, Jane," he said.

She leaned back in her chair, confused. "No."

“Eleven, we just...” Dr. Owens began, but Dr. Berger put up a hand, cutting him off.

“Did you know that we clean your room, Eleven?” Dr. Berger asked. When she shook her head, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic baggie with the pills she’d been spitting out. “And look what we found.”

Her eyes widened.

Dr. Berger looked behind her, and nodded at the guard. Before he could do anything, Eleven concentrated, sending the table that they were sitting at across the room, pinning the two doctors against the wall behind them.

By now the guard had his weapon, and was aiming it at Eleven. She momentarily released the table and, using her mind, pointed the weapon from her to the guard and fired. The guard fell to the floor.

Quickly, she turned back to the table. Dr. Berger was struggling to stand, but she sent the table back against he and Dr. Owens, and heard a crunch as the table hit Berger’s knee.

Still concentrating, she backed out of the room. Once out of it, she closed the door, released the table, and locked the door with her mind, breaking off the handle and trapping them in.

She ran to her room and grabbed the walkie. Suddenly, the lights started flashing and an alarm sounded off. She ran from her room and down the hallway. Before she got to the stairs, she encountered two guards with guns. Ignoring the blood and the pounding headache she had suddenly developed from using her powers, she made them shoot each other.

However, she didn’t hear the guard behind her, who shot her in the neck. Turning around, she snapped his neck.

Her hand went to where she had been shot, and she pulled out the dart. It was making her dizzy. Ignoring it, she struggled her way up the stairs, still clutching the walkie. She heard more voices coming, so she turned and headed down the stairs, almost tripping over

herself.

She got down to the gray floor, with its small white flakes and moaning vines. She went to an empty room and sat down. Her head was spinning, both from the exertion of using her powers and from whatever they had shot her with.

Turning on the walkie, she concentrated harder, the person she was trying to contact at the forefront of her mind. Quietly, she called, "Mike?"

There was static, then nothingness, and then, "El? Is that you?"

She could feel the blood in her ears now, but a smile came to her face. Weakly, she said, "Help. Please."

Static, then "Where are you? El!"

"Lab," she said, then added, "Mirkwood."

"El! We'll..."

She lost focus, and lost the connection. Her head wobbled, but she kept upright.

Feeling darkness close on her, she managed to stand up and, gripping the wall, she made it back to the room with the bath. After a moment of battling staying conscious, she found what she was looking for: the pipe she used, almost a year ago, to climb out of here and into the woods.

Bloody, tired, and weak, she crawled her way into the pipe. She had just managed to get outside when she passed out.

3. Right Side Up

Summary for the Chapter:

This chapter is about what Mike's been up to since Eleven's absence.

"El, where are you? Eleven! El!" Mike Wheeler paced, feeling the tears beginning to fall, as he called out to her. She had been here a minute ago, *where was she?*

It took a few minutes for it to sink in: she was gone.

The next hour was a blur. Police and ambulances arriving, someone checking to see if he was okay, his parents arriving, driving to the hospital.

He remembers Will being back, and how happy he was, seeing him after a week.

But he wouldn't be that happy, *truly* happy, for a while.

Fall

He was allowed to stay home for a few days (all of the boys were) as things were sorted out. They got their stories straight about what happened with Will, and what had gone on at the school. Mike just nodded his head and went along with it.

That first day at school, he and his friends were at lunch recess, when Troy and James walked by, Troy purposely bumping into Will.

"I thought you were dead, fairy," he said.

Will just looked at the ground and tried to walk away.

"Hey, Troy, how's your arm?" Mike asked with a sneer.

“Screw you, Wheeler,” Troy said, walking up to him. “You’re lucky I don’t kick your ass right now. And your little freak girlfriend isn’t here to defend you.” He shoved Mike, making him trip back a few steps.

“Where is she, anyway, huh? Out getting her ugly hair cut?”

And with that, Mike punched Troy in the face.

Troy fell back a few steps in disbelief. “You little shit!” he said.

Mike tackled him to the ground and, before Troy had a chance to react, landed punch after punch on the boy, tears streaming down his face.

It took Lucas, Dustin, and a teacher to finally drag him off.

He got suspended for the remainder of the week. Principal Coleman called his mother to come pick him up, and the two were silent in the car ride home.

When they arrived at their house, he stormed up the stairs without a word, slamming his door.

Dropping Holly off in front of the TV, Karen went to his room and knocked lightly. “Mike?”

“Go away,” he answered.

She opened the door anyway and saw her son lying on his bed, sobbing into his pillow.

She sat on the bed and rubbed his back. “Oh, Mike.”

They sat there for five minutes while he got his tears out. When he was all cried out, he sat up and hugged her.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “I just..he...Troy...he said something bad.”

“About your friend, Eleven?”

He nodded.

She sighed. "I know you're upset, and this boy, this Troy, he's probably a jerk, but you can't go and beat people up like that, Mike." She ran her hand through his hair. "You're lucky the principal called me and not your father."

He nodded, wiping his eyes.

"You really miss her, don't you?"

He nodded again, as a few stray tears fell from his eyes. "Am I grounded?"

She chuckled; she'd never had to ground him before. Sighing, she said "No friends until Sunday. And no video games."

His head on her shoulder, he nodded. "Are you going to tell dad?"

"I have to, Michael. But I'll break it to him tonight after dinner."

He nodded again.

Sunday afternoon he was in the basement when his friends came over. The boys sat around the game table, the others telling Mike what had happened while he was gone.

"We did this cool experiment in science," Dustin said excitedly. "You shoulda seen it!"

"Troy's walking around with a black eye," Lucas said, chuckling.

"He hasn't messed with us all week," Will added.

"Yeah, and if he did, I would kick his ass," Dustin said.

"No you wouldn't," Lucas said, snatching Dustin's hat.

"Hey, gimme that back!"

Lucas held it over his head as Dustin reached for it. Lucas, leaning

back in the chair, started to tip over, and he tossed the hat on the way down. It landed in El's fort, knocking down one of the sides.

"Damn it, guys," Mike said, getting up. He left the hat alone, but straightened out the fort. Behind him, Dustin and Lucas exchanged glances.

"Aren't you gonna...take that down?" Lucas asked.

Mike picked up Dustin's hat, and brought it over to the boy. "No," he said, matter-of-factly. "Why would I?"

"Mike," Lucas said, "She's go..."

"No she's not," Mike said, anger seeping into his voice.

Dustin put his hat on, his eyes on the table.

"Whatever," Lucas said under his breath.

Will, wanting things to go back to normal, started talking about the assignments Mike had missed. Soon after, things were back to normal as the boys talked about movies they wanted to see, the upcoming Thanksgiving break, and Christmas gifts.

Winter

It was the first Friday in December when he smiled, *really* smiled, for the first time. The boys were walking home from school in the snow, their bikes put away for the winter. Dustin had made a crack about Jennifer Hayes liking Will, and Will picked up a snowball and threw it at Dustin's head, knocking off his hat.

"I'm gonna kill you, Byers!" Dustin roared, dropping his backpack and rolling up a snowball. Within minutes, a full blown snowball fight had erupted between the group.

At first, Mike just watched, but when he saw Lucas sneaking up on

Dustin with a ball of snow, he quickly made one of his own and tossed it at Lucas, hitting him in the chest.

“Wheeler!” Lucas called, spitting out snow and rolling up a new one.

Mike felt a grin come to his face as they all threw snow at one another. A few moments later, he was making a new one, when he glanced up and *wham!* took a snowball to the face. He fell down, clutching his nose.

“Crap! Mike, are you okay?” Lucas asked, rushing over.

“My nose,” Mike whined, his hand holding his face. “I think...I think...”

With a smile he sprang up, throwing a snowball into Lucas’ face.

“No fair!” Lucas yelled, and the fight continued.

Mike felt himself begin to laugh.

It was New Year’s Eve. When he woke up in the morning, he was looking forward to the day. But as the hours passed, his mood soured. His friends and their families were coming over for the midnight countdown. Usually he looked forward to New Year’s Eve; Dustin would always pretend to kiss one of the boys, which would end in play-wrestling. Last year their parents had let them each try a small cup of champagne, and they’d giggled the night away in the basement.

But this year, he felt...off. He had been feeling better, but knowing that this was a day where couples got together to ring in the possibilities of the new year made him sad.

And like Christmas, he’d wanted to do this holiday with Eleven, as he wondered if she’d ever celebrated anything in the lab.

After his friends came over, they hung out in the basement until it was five minutes to midnight. They went upstairs, but Mike slunk back down to the basement where Lucas found him.

“Come on, Mike. It’s almost time,” Lucas said.

Mike sighed as he shook his head. “I don’t want to go upstairs, Lucas. It’s stupid.”

“Mike, come on, it’s New Year’s Eve. We always do the countdown.”

“I know, I just...I don’t feel like doing it.”

Lucas crossed his arms. “It’s because of El, isn’t it?”

Mike looked at his feet, not saying anything.

“I miss her, too, but...” He nodded towards the fort. “It’s not like she’s...”

“She’s coming back,” Mike said, with certainty in his voice.

Upstairs, they heard their families counting down. “Ten! Nine! Eight!”

With one last look at his friend, Lucas turned and went up the stairs.

Mike, alone in the basement, glanced at the fort. “Happy New Year’s, El,” he said quietly.

The next afternoon his friends came back over to play Dungeons & Dragons. It came down to Lucas facing off with a Thessalhydra.

As Lucas picked up the dice, Dustin nervously said, “No, Lucas, don’t do fireball. It won’t kill it!”

Shaking the dice in his hands, Lucas said “Come on, come on...” He let go of the dice, and a smile erupted on his face when he saw what he’d rolled. “Yes! Fireball, sucka!”

The boys began to whoop and cheer. Mike continued the campaign. “You defeat the Thessalhydra, and emerge victorious from the cave! You are instantly rewarded with...”

Then, very softly, he heard “Mike?”

He stopped, mid speech. He looked around. "Did you guys hear that?"

"Hear what?" Will asked.

"It sounded like...like El," Mike said, looking towards the fort.

"Mike, come on," Lucas said.

"No, I swear! You guys didn't just hear her voice?"

"Mike, this is ridiculous," Lucas said, rolling his eyes.

"Screw you, Lucas! She was just..."

"Okay!" Dustin shouted. "Let's just finish the campaign, guys, alright?"

Mike sat back in his chair. He knew that Dustin had only shouted to stop he and Lucas from arguing, but part of him thought Dustin didn't believe him either.

He continued with the campaign, but he *knew* he had heard her voice.

Two weeks later he sat in the fort, playing with the Supercomm. Since the campaign, he had been spending more time than usual in the basement, hoping to hear her again. Despite what the other boys claimed, he *knew* he had heard her.

This Sunday night in January, after not hearing anything since the campaign, he tried using the Supercomm. After fiddling with the knobs for ten minutes, he slammed it to the floor and brought his knees to his chest.

Sighing, he said, "El? Are you there? It's me, it's...it's Mike. I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, please find a way back, okay? I know you're not..." He didn't want to say the word "dead". "I know you're still there, El. Please just...give me a sign or something."

“Michael?”

His head sprang up, and he saw his mother kneeling in front of the fort.

She looked at him with a worried expression, then said, “It’s time for bed.”

He nodded, and climbed out of the fort, straightening a sheet he disturbed upon exiting. He had one foot on the stairs when his mother said his name again.

“Yeah?”

She came behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You’re going to have to move on.”

He sighed, and continued up the stairs.

Spring

The boys were working together on a project for history. Their teacher had given them time in the library to work, so the boys had books spread around their table as they looked up their information.

“Will, which book had that picture you showed me,” Dustin asked, grabbing random books.

“That one,” Will pointed out.

“Mike,” Lucas said to Mike, who’d been doodling in his notebook.

Looking up, he said, “Yeah?”

“You gonna help us?”

“Yeah,” he said, sitting up.

Lucas passed him a book. “Look in there for...what was it again?” he

asked Dustin.

As the two boys conferred, Mike was startled when a girl walked by and slipped a piece of paper in front of him, then continued walking. He watched her go, unsure of who she was. "Who was that?" he asked Will, the only one who'd seen.

"That's Sherry Miller, she's new here."

Mike frowned, and opened the folded piece of paper. Inside was written "I like you. Do you like me? Yes/No"

He turned and looked over his shoulder, and saw Sherry and her friends working. Sherry glanced his way, caught his eye, turned red, and looked back down at the book in front of her.

Mike turned back around, shaking his head.

"What's it say?" Dustin asked.

"It says she likes me," Mike said.

"Holy shit!" Dustin said, loud enough that a few people turned their way. He grinned. "Sorry."

Lucas glanced at the note. "What're you going to say?"

Mike shook his head, picking up his pencil and pulling a book closer. "I'm going to tell her no."

The boys glanced over at Sherry, who again looked up, then looked back down.

"Mike, she's cute," Lucas said.

"Can I circle yes?" Dustin asked.

"Guys, can we just get to work?" Mike asked.

"If you say it's because of Eleven, I'm..." Lucas began.

Mike slammed his pencil on the table and glared at Lucas. "Not everything is about El, okay? I just don't like her!"

Grabbing his notebook and backpack, he stormed out of the library.

A few days later, Mike went down to the basement in search of his campaign book, but instead he found Holly playing inside El's fort.

"Holly, get out of the fort."

Smiling up at him, she answered with "Nuh-unh!"

His mom, who was doing laundry, looked over at them. "Mike, you need to take that down."

Mike sighed as he led Holly out. "Mom, I...I can't."

His mother closed the lid on the washing machine and walked over. Picking up Holly, she said "Well, I guess you can leave it up a little longer, but it's going to have to come down sometime, Michael."

"Okay, mom, but not today."

His mother nodded. "Come on, Holly." The small girl took their mother's hand and the two climbed the stairs.

Mike sat in front of the fort, smoothing out the wrinkled sections Holly had caused. Straightening it out, he lay on his back in the fort.

He couldn't help wondering, was he being stupid? It had been months since she disappeared. And though deep down he knew that Eleven was still alive, how long could he wait?

Mike felt tears coming on, and didn't fight them this time.

Suddenly, he saw a flash of light.

Sitting up, he muttered, "What the hell?"

A lamp that sat next to the couch suddenly flashed on, then off.

Jumping up, he said, "El? Is...is that you?"

The lamp flickered two times.

Smiling despite his tears, he called, "El? Where are you? Are you here? Are you okay?"

When nothing happened, he repeated his questions, but still got no response.

"I'm telling you, she's here."

Two days later, he led his friends into the basement. After school had let out, he'd told them he had something to show them downstairs. He'd tried to keep it a secret until they arrived, but on the way home Dustin had dragged it out of him.

Lucas, of course, had rolled his eyes, but he'd kept quiet and come with them.

"Mike..." Lucas began.

"Lucas, I'm serious," Mike said. "The lamp, it was, like, flickering on and off."

Dustin looked around. "Mental."

"He might be telling the truth, guys," Will said. When I was...gone, I was able to do stuff with the lights.

Mike nodded. "Just give it a minute." Then, "El! El, are you here?"

Nothing happened at first, and Mike was about to quit, when the lamp flickered on, then off.

"Look! Did you see that?"

Lucas shook his head. "It's probably just the electricity, man. Come on."

"No, it wasn't. El! Do it again!"

"Stop screaming, your mom's gonna think you're crazy," Lucas said.

Nothing happened again, then the lamp flickered.

“See!” Mike said, turning to his friends.

“Maybe...” Dustin said.

“This is ridiculous,” Lucas said. Grabbing his backpack, he said, “I’m going home.”

The other boys watched him go

Mike crossed his arms, sighing. Looking at Dustin, he said, “He thinks Eleven is dead.”

“Yeah, I know, but..”

“What do *you* think?”

Dustin shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, maybe...”

“I think she’s alive,” Will said.

The other boys looked at him. They had told him a few things about Eleven, but were both surprised when he made this declaration, having never met the girl.

“You do?” Mike asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean, if I could survive in that place, she could, too. And she has powers, right?”

Mike felt like hugging him. The fact that he wasn’t the only one who thought she was still alive somewhere made him feel as if a load had been lifted.

Dustin nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Thank you, guys,” Mike said, tears beginning to form. He wiped them away.

That evening, Lucas came back over. “What do you want?” Mike asked.

Lucas extended his hand. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't draw first blood, so..."

"No, but...can I come in?"

Mike moved so Lucas could enter. "Look. I hardly doubt that El is living in your house, turning on lights and stuff, but..."

"But *I do*," Mike said.

Lucas held up his hands. "I know. And...even if I'm having a hard time believing it, that's no excuse to be a mouth breather to you. So..." he held his hand out again. "I'm sorry."

Mike reluctantly stepped forward. "I'm not going to stop hoping she comes back," he told his friend.

Lucas nodded. "I know. And if you want, I'll help you."

Nodding, Mike shook his hand.

Days passed. Mike began getting so caught up in the science fair that everyone assumed he was moving on. A smile would cross his face every so often, but it still wasn't a regular thing.

Summer

By the end of June, he was spending less time in the basement and more time out with his friends; riding their bikes around town, enjoying movies and ice cream, and staying up late. He still spent time downstairs, of course. He would talk to the lamp in hopes of a response every so often.

Occasionally around town he would see Sherry Miller. And though he had to admit she was pretty, and the way she blushed when she saw

him was kind of cute, he knew, deep down, that he wouldn't be happy with her. *Truly* happy. That could only be achieved through one person; the one he was waiting for.

The Wheelers took their yearly end-of-summer vacation before school started. Mike was reluctant to go; he wanted to be home in case Eleven tried to contact him. Instead, he snuck his Supercomm into his suitcase.

The family packed into the station wagon and took the long drive from Hawkins to Ogden Dunes, where his father had a cabin he shared with his brothers and sister.

The family spent the next few days swimming, fishing, and enjoying one another's company. Although Eleven was still on his mind, Mike had a good time. He taught Holly how to swim and skip rocks on the water; he threw water on Nancy when she was trying to sunbathe, and his dad let him drive (for 5 seconds).

When it was time for everyone to go home, even Mike was reluctant. *The only thing that could've made this better* , he thought, *was if El were here.*

Fall

It was the middle of October. School had been going for a few weeks and, for the most part, things were back to normal. Mike's friends still wished he would take the fort down, but they'd come to terms with him leaving it up.

Seventh grade was a little more difficult for the boys, but they helped each other stay on top of things.

After school that day, Mike did his usual routine; did his homework, ate dinner, watched TV. At eight o'clock he was in his room, putting the finishing touches on his homework, when his walkie crackled.

He glanced at it, thinking nothing of it. But a moment later, he heard “Mike?”

And he froze.

It was her voice. *Her* voice.

Scrambling from his chair, he grabbed the walkie. “El? Is that you?”

Static for a few seconds, then “Help. Please.”

Feeling his heart pounding in his chest, he asked, “Where are you? El!”

“Lab,” then “Mirkwood.”

He smiled. “El! We’ll come and get you, okay! Just stay there, I’ll find you!”

No response. Pressing the button again, he called, “El?” Still nothing.

Snatching his backpack, he dumped out his notebooks and binders and replaced them with a flashlight and a change of clothes. Then, turning his Supercomm back on, called for Lucas.

“What, Mike?” he said when he finally answered. “Do you need the answers for..”

“Eleven just called me,” Mike told him. “Over.”

There was a pause, then Lucas asked, “What? Over.”

“Eleven just called me on the radio. I’m *serious* . Get your flashlight, we’re going to find her.”

“Mike, it’s eight..”

“Lucas, dammit, get your stuff,” Mike said, forcefully. “She said she’s at Mirkwood. I’m going out there with or without you, but make up your mind.”

More static, then Lucas said, “Alright.”

So Mike snuck out of his house and rode over to Lucas', the two then rode over to Dustin's and recruited him. On the way out to Mirkwood, they radioed Will who said he'd meet them there.

The sky was dark and cloudy, and it looked like it was about to rain. When the boys all met up, Lucas looked at Mike. "So? What now?"

Mike stepped off his bike and took out his flashlight. "She said she's out here. We look until we find her." He turned to Will. They all knew this was the area where he had had his encounter with the Demogorgon. Nervously, Mike said, "If you don't want to, you don't..."

"I'm going," Will said. "She helped find me. I can help find her."

The four boys walked into the woods as thunder roared above them, the threat of rain making them nervous. They called Eleven's name, but got no response. Through the trees they saw a glimpse of Hawkins Lab, but didn't want to get too close.

As the first few drops of rain started to fall, Dustin said "Guys, I think we should go back."

"No," Mike said. "We have to find her. She's in trouble."

"Mike, we've been out here for an hour," Dustin continued. "If we haven't found her by now, then we..."

He stopped, mid-sentence, when they heard leaves crunch.

They stood, frozen in place. "Did you hear that?" Mike asked. The boys nodded. "Eleven?" he said, louder.

Another crunch. He turned the beam of his flashlight in the direction, and it caught something.

Raising his flashlight, Mike could feel a weight lifted, and happiness ooze back into his veins as he shone light on the shivering girl in front of him. It was her. And she was back.

4. Reunions and Rainfall

“El,” Mike said softly, as he stepped forward.

She smiled the small smile that he had missed. “Mike...”

And with that, she collapsed into his arms.

Holding her, he sat on the wet ground as more raindrops began to fall. The boys gathered around him.

“What happened?” Lucas asked.

“Is she okay?” Dustin said.

“Guys, give me some space,” Mike said, cradling the still girl’s head in his hands. He moved one of his hands to her shoulder and lightly shook her. “El,” he said quietly. “El...”

She stirred, her eyelids fluttering open. Her eyes met his, and she smiled. “Mike.”

Despite the cold rain that was beginning to fall, Mike felt warm tears stinging his face as he smiled. “You came back,” he said to her.

She smiled again, then muttered “Bad...”

“Wh-what?” Mike asked, leaning in closer.

“Bad...me...” then her head lolled, and she passed out again.

“El!” he said, shaking her. She didn’t wake up. Looking to his friends, he said “Guys, we’ve gotta get her home.”

“How?” Lucas asked, as he, Dustin, and Will stood up. “How’re we going to get her home if she’s unconscious?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said, trying frantically to think of something.

“I can ride home and get your mom,” Dustin suggested.

“Let’s take her to my house,” Will said as thunder rumbled above

them. "It's only a few minutes away."

"Guys!" Lucas said, "Are we really forgetting that she's unconscious? How are we supposed to move her?"

"I'll carry her," Mike said, standing up with El in his arms.

"You can't be serious," Lucas said.

But Mike was already moving, his long legs taking him towards the road. Though sluggish with the weight of El, his face wore a mask of determination. *He was going to save her .*

Lucas, Dustin, and Will were right behind him, and when they got to the road, the three of them hopped on their bikes. Will led the way to the Byers home.

With the light rain and everyone riding slower so Mike could keep up, it took a lot longer than usual to get to Will's house. By the time they arrived, their clothes were dripping wet, and Mike's teeth were chattering.

Will unlocked the front door and the boys all clamored inside.

"Where?" Mike asked, looking for a place to put Eleven. His arms shook and his breath was ragged from carrying Eleven in the rain.

"My room," Will said. "My mom's still at work. I'll go and see if Jonathan's here." First, Will opened his bedroom door and Mike, who felt his grip slipping, got some help from Lucas as they carried Eleven into Will's room and, as gently as they could, lay her on the bed. Mike threw the covers over her, and smiled as she curled into a ball.

"I think she's just knocked out," Mike said.

Will returned with Jonathan, who was pulling on a shirt. When he saw who was in Will's bed, he gasped.

"Is she alright?" he asked the boys.

"We think so," Dustin answered.

“Um...” Jonathan tapped his foot as he thought of what to do. “We should call Hopper or someone.”

“No!” Mike said, as a bolt of lightning lit up the room. All eyes turned to him.

Looking back at the girl in the bed, he said “What if the bad men are looking for her? She said ‘bad’ before she passed out. Maybe it was ‘bad men’.”

“Mike, it's *Hopper* ,” Lucas said as thunder sounded. “We can trust him.”

They heard the front door open, and their heads swiveled.

“Will, why're your friends here so late?,” they heard Joyce call. “And it's raining, they need to go home.”

Will and Jonathan ducked into the hallway, leaving Mike, Dustin, and Lucas nervously waiting.

There were hushed whispers, and then the Byers family walked in. Joyce took a look at the bed and, similar to her son, let out a gasp. Walking to the bed, she asked, “Where was she?”

“Out by Mirkwood,” Mike answered.

Joyce looked confused. “Where?”

“The woods by Hawkins Lab,” Lucas offered.

Joyce sat on the bed and pulled the covers to the young girl's neck. Rubbing her back, she looked up and asked, “Well...did you tell anybody?”

The boys shrugged. “Not yet,” Dustin answered.

“Well, okay,” Joyce said, standing. “You boys need to get home. I should probably call Hop...and we can...”

“We're not leaving,” Mike said.

Joyce looked taken aback. "Excuse me?"

Mike shook his head. "We're not leaving. Well, at least *I'm* not leaving, Ms. Byers. I want to stay."

"Me too," Dustin said. Lucas nodded in agreement.

Joyce sighed as she stood up. "Okay, then. Let me call Hop, then you boys need to call your parents." She left the room, and Jonathan followed behind her. After a moment, Dustin and Will left the room, leaving Mike, Lucas, and a sleeping Eleven.

After a few quiet moments, Lucas said, "I'm sorry."

Mike, who'd been gazing at Eleven, looked up. "What?"

Lucas was shaking his head. "This whole time...I thought she was gone. But you...you never stopped thinking she was out there, and I didn't believe you. I'm sorry."

Mike smiled. "That's okay." He sighed. "We should probably go call our moms, huh?"

"Right."

Mike went to leave, but when he got to the door, Lucas was still standing by El's bedside. Turning, Mike asked, "You coming?"

"In a minute," Lucas answered.

Once Mike left, Lucas knelt next to the bed. "El?" he whispered to the sleeping girl. "He's been waiting for you for almost a year. Don't leave again, okay? I don't think he could handle it." Grinning, he then added "Good to have you back, weirdo."

Still smiling, he stood back up and went to meet his friends in the other room.

Joyce wasn't able to get ahold of Hopper, after calling both his home and the station. The boys' parents were less than pleased that they

had snuck out of the house so late on a school night. Dustin's father was coming to pick up Lucas and Dustin.

Mike, the last one to call home, knew that no matter what happened, he was staying here tonight.

The phone rang a few times before Nancy picked up. "Mike?"

"Uh, hey Nancy. Can I, uh, talk to mom?"

Whispering, Nancy said "Where *are* you? Mom is pissed. She went to your room to get your laundry and you were gone."

"I'm at Will's. But Nancy, you won't believe..."

"Is that Mike?" he heard his mom ask in the background. Then after a shuffling of the phone, he heard his mother's voice. "Mike? Where the hell are you?"

Mike gulped, knowing he was in trouble. His mother never swore. "I'm at Will's, mom. I..."

"Get over here *right now* ."

"Mom, you don't understand! I..."

"I don't care, Michael. You need to come home right..."

"It's Eleven!" he said, loudly. The other boys turned his way. "She's back, mom. She needed our help and we went out to save her. I know you would've said no, that's why I snuck out. But she's here, at Will's."

His mother was silent for a moment before she quietly responded "oh."

"And I...she's asleep right now, but mom..." he said this next part quietly, turning from watching eyes. "I want to be here when she wakes up. Please. Mom, I've been waiting for a year, and now..."

"Okay," his mother said quietly.

“Really?”

“Yes, Michael. You can stay.”

“So...I can miss school, too?” he asked. Tomorrow was Thursday.

“Yes,” she sighed into the phone.

He smiled. “Thanks, mom.”

“But don’t think you aren’t grounded. When you come home tomorrow we’re going to have a talk. Put Joyce on the phone.”

So Mike gave the phone to Ms. Byers and went and told his friends the good news.

In another part of Hawkins, Jim Hopper opened his eyes, and brought a hand to his head when he felt the headache kick in.

He was laying in bed with a woman, Peggy (if he remembered right) whom he’d met at his usual bar a few hours ago after too many drinks. One thing had led to another and he found himself here, waking up in her bedroom.

Letting out a sigh, he carefully pulled her arm off his chest as he got up from the bed and found his pants on the floor. Putting them on, he dug through the pockets until he found what he was looking for-his cigarettes-and, careful so as not to wake Peggy, crept out of the bedroom and outside.

The heavy downpour that had occurred earlier had lightened up, and as he stepped out onto her porch, the steady beat of rain on the roof reminded him of uneven percussion music. He lit his cigarette, and took a few drags before he saw something that made him pause. Shaking his head, he muttered “Shit.”

Parked across the street was a government car; very similar to the government car he’d gotten into almost a year ago. He held up his index finger, asking them to wait, then went back inside to get his shirt. When he returned to the street, a man from the backseat was

standing behind the passenger side, door open. Hopper climbed in, and the man climbed in after him.

Inside were the driver, who wore MP, for military police, on his arm. In the passenger side was a bald-headed man who held crutches in the space between he and his door.

In the backseat with Hopper were another man with MP on his arm, and another man in a suit. With Hopper's size, it was a tight squeeze for all three of them.

Hopper sighed. "What is it?"

"Where is the girl?" the bald man asked.

"Huh?"

"The girl," the suit-wearing man next to him answered, "From Hawkins Lab. Where is she?"

Hopper shrugged. "How the hell should I know?"

"Because you're the one that's been giving her food," the bald man said, turning to look at him.

Hopper gulped, and tried not to seem nervous. *So they know about the box*. "It doesn't matter," he said, shaking his head. "She's in that..place, right?"

The bald man sighed. "She was able to get out of there about a week ago."

"Wow." Hopper couldn't help but chuckle. "So this is two times you guys lost her, huh?"

The bald man glared at him. "Where. Is. She?"

Hopper shook his head, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know. Search my place if you don't believe me."

"We already did," the bald man said, turning forward. Looking back at Hopper in the rearview mirror, he said, "We need you to use your

resources. Ask around, see if anyone has seen a young girl suddenly appear in the neighborhood.”

“Why me?” Hopper asked.

“Because you’re the chief of police,” the suit-wearing man next to him said. “And people will trust you.”

“And because if you don’t,” the bald man said, looking outside at the neighborhood, “The good folks of Hawkins will find out their chief was willing to sell out a little girl. Not to mention that you’ve been lying to them all of this time about what happened to Will Byers.”

“Hey,” Hopper said, leaning forward. “I don’t know who you are, but I had a deal with-”

“Your deal,” the bald man said, interrupting, “Was that you would lie about Byers and we would stay away from him and your friends. This girl changes all of that.”

“Look,” the man next to him said, “All we want you to do is ask around, okay? That’s all.”

Hopper nodded his head.

“Good.”

The man next to him opened the door and let Hopper out. When the man got back in, the car started up, and they pulled away into the night.

Now free, Hopper sighed as he walked back to Peggy’s home. So the girl was out, huh? If his gut feeling was right (and it usually was) he had a feeling of where she might be.

Back at the Byers, Mike and Will were inside Will’s bedroom, while Eleven continued to sleep soundly. Joyce had found a sleeping bag for Mike, and had been setting it up in the living room. Mike had rejected this, insisting that he sleep in Will’s room in case El woke up. Joyce had rolled her eyes, but she saw the determination in the boy’s

eyes, and relented.

Will had brought the sleeping bag in and lay it at the foot of the bed, but Mike had immediately picked it up and moved it to the side of the bed, close to Eleven.

Grabbing a pillow for his friend, Will said, "You really like her, huh?"

Mike had been straightening out the sleeping bag, but now he looked up. "What?"

Tossing Mike the pillow, Will continued. "Eleven. You really like her, don't you?"

Mike couldn't hide the blush that inched it's way to his face. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Tell me about her."

Mike looked confused. "We already told you stuff about her."

"I know," Will said. "Tell me again."

Mike sighed, looking at the girl curled up under the covers. "She's...I don't know....she's one of the coolest people I know. She doesn't talk much, but she gets her point across without saying a lot of words. She's one of the bravest people *ever*. And even though it was only a week, she fit right into our group." He shrugged. "Not at first, but, you know, towards the end, it felt right."

Will nodded, understanding.

Dustin and Lucas came in, smiles on their faces.

"I thought you guys were going home," Mike said.

"We were, but Ms. Byers talked my dad into letting us stay," Dustin said with a smile.

"Guess we're having a sleepover, then," Will said, going to find more sleeping bags and blankets.

Ten minutes later, the boys were arranged all over the room; Lucas and Mike's were on opposite sides of the bed, Dustin at the foot of the bed, and Will was able to squeeze into a spot between Lucas and Dustin.

"So..." Will started, after they'd turned off the lights. "What's the first thing you're going to say to her when she wakes up?"

"Holy crap, you have hair!" Dustin said, which got the other boys laughing.

"Where were you? Are you okay?" Lucas wondered, after the giggling had settled down.

It was silent for a moment, then Will asked, "Mike? What about you?"

A thousand thoughts ran through Mike's mind: *I missed you. I'm so glad you're safe. You look pretty. I knew you'd come back to me .*

But what he told his friends was "Just that it's good to see her again."

Lucas snorted, knowing how Mike felt about her. "Yeah, right."

"What?" Mike asked.

"You're gonna have to do better than *that* ," Dustin said.

"What do you mean?"

"Mike, we all know you like her," Dustin continued.

"I...uh..." Mike sighed, not having an answer to that.

"Just tell her something that'll make her smile," Dustin said before he yawned.

"She's going to smile just seeing Mike," Lucas said as he turned onto his side.

The talk between the four eventually died down as the rain outside continued to softly fall, and soon the boys were asleep. Dustin first,

with his soft snoring. Will after him, followed by Lucas.

Mike was the last to fall asleep. He lay on his side, facing the bed. Once he knew everyone else was sleeping, he sat up to gaze once more at Eleven. She looked different than she did last time; but then again, so did he. She was taller, and the hair that she'd been so self-conscious about had grown out, just past her ears. Her face was turned this way, and she looked peaceful as she dozed. Smiling, Mike whispered "I'll see you in the morning, El." Then, making *definitely* sure his friends were sleeping, he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Settling back into his sleeping bag, he finally closed his eyes and, despite the anticipation of what tomorrow would bring, he fell asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

I promise El will be awake next chapter

5. You Are My Sunshine

Blinking, Eleven slowly awoke. Sunlight was poking through the curtains, and as she blinked herself awake, she looked outside at the rising sun. After nearly a year in the grayness of the Upside Down, as well as those days in the lab, to her the sun was beautiful and magnificent, and she marveled at the way the light shone through the room.

The room; she suddenly realized she didn't know where she was.

Sitting up slowly as she tried to get her bearings, she looked around. The room reminded her of Mike's, with its pictures on the wall, and clothes strewn on furniture.

Then she remembered she had seen Mike last night.

She was also suddenly aware of a noise coming from the end of the bed. Not sure what it was, she crawled from under the covers and leaned towards the end.

She smiled when she saw the source of the noise: Dustin, curly hair and all, was sleeping on the floor, snoring through his nose. Looking to her left, she recognized Will from the one time she'd seen him. And, a few feet away lay Lucas.

She was home.

But where was Mike? She turned to the other side of the bed and felt her smile get bigger as she saw him sleeping as well, curled up and his mop of black hair strewn over the pillow.

She watched him sleep for a few minutes. True, she was glad to be here with her friends. But she was especially happy to see Mike again.

As if he knew he was being observed, she watched as Mike suddenly awoke, rubbing his eyes and sitting up in a daze, as if he, too, wasn't sure where he was. His head turned a moment later, and his eyes met hers.

“El!” he said in an excited whisper as he climbed out of his sleeping bag. He wrapped her in a hug, tighter than she’d ever had. She tried to hug him back just as hard.

“Mike,” she whimpered, a tear falling down her cheek.

They pulled away but remained close, their hands holding each others.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, wiping the tear on her shoulder.

“I’m so happy you’re back,” he said, his eyes turning red as he fought back tears of his own. “I missed you, El.”

She tilted her head. “Missed?”

He smiled, forgetting how she sometimes needed the simplest of things explained. “I was sad. Really sad that you weren’t here.”

She smiled back. “Me too.”

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. She looked around the room in confusion. Sensing what she was about to ask, he said, “We’re at Will’s house. His house was closer to Mirkwood.” Then, getting serious, he asked, “El? Last night you said ‘bad.’ Are the bad...”

He got interrupted by a loud yawn. The two turned their heads to the end of the bed, where Dustin’s arm appeared as he stretched, then sat up. He saw Mike and, more importantly, a conscious Eleven, and he broke into his signature smile. “You’re awake!” he said, loud enough that Will and Lucas began to stir.

Dustin climbed from his sleeping bag and jumped on the bed, wrapping El in a bear hug. “You’re back!” he said.

By now, Lucas and Will were up, and Lucas came from behind El, hugging her also. Will stood back, hands in his pockets, watching the three hug.

"You have hair now," Lucas said when he let go, as he looked the girl up and down. She blushed.

"Hey, I was gonna say that," Dustin said, whacking Lucas' shoulder.

Eleven looked between them at the boy standing by himself. Mike, seeing her gaze drift to Will, stopped Lucas and Dustin from arguing.

"El," Mike said, "This is Will."

Will took a step forward and took one of his hands from his pocket. "Hi," he said, waving shyly.

"Hi," she said.

The next few minutes Lucas and Dustin bombarded her with questions:

"Where were you?"

"Were you in the Upside Down?"

"Were there any monsters?"

"Are the bad men after you?"

Eleven didn't answer; she would fidget with her hands as the boys waited for a response. Noticing how uncomfortable she looked, Mike spoke up.

"Guys, she just woke up, let's give her some time, alright?"

The boys nodded, and instead told her what they'd been up to in the time she was away. Lucas and Dustin did most of the talking, with Will and Mike adding in comments every so often. Sometimes she would scrunch her face in confusion and Mike would explain what they were talking about.

They got so caught up in talking to Eleven that they almost didn't notice when Joyce came into the room; Eleven noticed, and turned to the woman in the doorway.

“Honey,” Joyce said to Eleven as she entered. “Are you alright?” Approaching the bed, she wrapped the girl in a hug, one that Eleven gratefully returned.

The boys got off the bed as Joyce and Eleven pulled apart, Joyce’s hands on El’s shoulders. “Is everything okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m good,” Eleven said, adding a small smile. The smile disappeared for a moment, and she put her hand to her stomach.

“Are you hungry?” Joyce asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Joyce smiled at the girl, rubbing her shoulders. “The boys and I will make you breakfast. How does bacon, eggs, and pancakes sound?”

Eleven glanced at Mike, then looked back at Joyce with a look of uncertainty. Joyce, confused, looked to Mike as well.

“She likes Eggos,” Mike explained.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry,” Joyce said. “We don’t have any.”

Eleven breathed a sigh of disappointment.

“You’ll like the food, El,” Mike told her.

Eleven nodded her head.

A short time later Jim Hopper drove his truck up the dirt road to the Byers home. Arriving at work this morning, he’d been inundated with the normal calls and problems of a small town: garden gnomes missing, a car broken into, and a stolen bike. But what had caught his ear was when Flo told him that Joyce Byers had called twice last night, looking for him. He’d immediately grabbed himself a donut and headed out to her home.

Now, as he parked his car in front of the house, he couldn’t help but

wonder if the call was about the missing girl. And, if it was, how was he going to handle it?

The boys, Eleven, and Jonathan and Joyce were eating their breakfast when there was a knock at the door. Wiping her mouth, Joyce stood up to get it; it was Hopper.

“Where were you?” she asked as he came inside. “I called and called.”

“It was a crazy night for me,” he said, coming in and taking off his hat. “What did you need?”

Closing the door, Joyce quietly said “That girl from Hawkins Lab is back.”

Hopper raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes,” Joyce said, nodding. “Come here.”

The two walked into the kitchen where the kids were still eating breakfast. Eleven glanced up at the new visitor, and their eyes met for a second before she went back to eating.

Hopper took Joyce’s arm and led her back into the living room.

“What?” Joyce asked, sensing that something was wrong.

“When did she get here?” Jim asked.

“The girl? I don’t know, sometime last night.”

Hopper sighed, rubbed his face. Quietly, he said, “The people from the lab. They came to me last night.”

Joyce’s eyes widened in surprise. “*What ?*”

Nodding, Hopper continued. “They told me they’re looking for the girl, said they wanted me to ask around for her.”

“Well, what’re you going to tell them?”

Looking back towards the kitchen, Hopper was silent for a moment. "I don't know. But you've got to keep her hidden for now, until I can think of what to do."

"Of course," Joyce said, nodding.

The two returned to the kitchen, where Will and Jonathan were cleaning the table, while El finished off the last pancake, her friends talking to one another at the table.

"You okay?" Hopper asked Eleven.

She nodded her head.

"It's good to see you back."

"Chief? What're we going to do?" Dustin asked.

"Don't worry about it," Hopper said, putting his hat back on. Nodding at Joyce, he let himself out.

Will turned to his mother. "Mom?"

Sighing, Joyce sat down next to Eleven. Her eyes focused on El's brown ones. "You're going to have to stay here, with me, for a while. Is that okay?"

"Yes," El answered.

Joyce smiled. "That's good, sweetie." Turning to the other boys, she said, "I think you all need to start heading home."

"Awww," Dustin whined.

"Can we stay a little bit longer?" Mike asked.

"Just a little bit," Joyce conceded as she stood up. "But you need to go soon."

Joyce relieved her son from cleaning the dishes, and the five kids went back to Will's bedroom.

Eleven sat on the bed, swinging her legs and watching them go back and forth.

“Where’d you get those clothes?” Lucas, sitting at Will’s desk, asked. He just now noticed the shirt and jeans she was wearing, stiff from last night’s rain.

“Lab,” she answered.

“Are they still after you? The bad men?” Dustin asked.

El nodded.

Will, who’d been going through his dresser, came back with a sweater and another pair of jeans. “I don’t know if this will fit you, but you can wear them, if you like,” he told her.

Eleven took them, then looked at Will. “Thank you.”

Lucas glanced at Mike, who had been quiet since they got back to the room. “Um,” he said, standing up, “Let’s go call our parents and tell them we’re coming home.”

He and Dustin stood and left, with Will behind them.

Mike, who’d been leaning against the doorframe, turned to go as well, but Eleven said his name: “Mike?”

“Yeah, El?” he asked as he came back in.

“What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “Nothing.”

“Mike. Friends tell the truth.”

He nodded, and walked back into the room. “I wanted you to stay with me, El. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“But now...” he shook his head, and sat next to her.

“Will you visit me?” she asked quietly.

Mike nodded his head vigorously. “Every day, El.”

Then, quietly, Mike asked, “The bad men. Is it the same ones from before?”

She shook her head. “No. Different.”

“Did they hurt you?”

She nodded, looking down.

Mike sighed. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

She smiled at him. “Yes. I’m home.”

Mike looked at her, with a different look in his eyes. “I’ll protect you, El. From the bad men. I’m not going to let them get you again.”

“Promise?”

He nodded. “I promise.”

When it was time to leave, Dustin and Lucas hopped on their bikes, and Mike walked. The other two rode slowly so their friend could keep up.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lucas asked Mike as the trio began their trek.

“Yeah, I thought you’d be happy with El being back,” Dustin added.

Mike let out a sigh. Sadly, he admitted “I wanted her to stay with me.”

Joyce had talked with her sons; Jonathan and Will were going to share Jonathan’s room for the time being, with Will giving up his room for El. It was a temporary solution, but one that satisfied them for now.

“Wouldn’t the bad men look for her there?” Dustin asked. “I mean, maybe your place will be the first place they look.”

Mike admitted Dustin had a point. “Still...”

They arrived at Mike’s bike, still tossed on the ground from the previous night. He shook it an attempt to get some of the water from it, but that didn’t do much. Shrugging, Mike got on and the three rode their bikes back home.

Dustin’s house came first, then Lucas’. Mike was nervous as he approached his home at the end of the cul-de-sac. He wasn’t looking forward to how his mother was going to react.

The Wheeler house was quiet as he lay his bike down next to the garage. The only sound was the light breeze blowing the occasional branch. His dad was surely at work. Nancy would be at school. So that left his mom.

He unlocked the door and could hear the TV playing; Sesame Street or something kid-ish. Walking into the family room, he saw Holly plopped in front of it, a stuffed animal in her arms. She glanced at Mike, then looked back at the television.

A moment later he heard footsteps coming up from the basement, and then saw his mother as she came up.

“There you are,” she said, going to her son and hugging him. “Are you alright?”

He nodded. “Yeah, mom, I’m okay.”

She guided him to the table, and they sat.

“How’s your friend?”

“She’s good, I guess. Scared.”

Karen nodded.

“I’m sorry I snuck out, I just...”

"It's okay, Michael," she said. Shrugging, she said "I'm not as mad as I was last night."

Mike let a grin come to his lips. "Cool."

"But that doesn't mean you're going to go unpunished," Karen added.

"But I want to be able to see El! I promised her I'd..."

"Mike," she said, putting a hand up to stop him. "You can still go and see her." After seeing the look of relief on his face, she continued. "*But* . Your homework has to be finished, and your chores have to be done everyday before you go over. Understand?"

He nodded his head. "Deal."

He took a small nap and, when he awoke, grabbed his Supercomm and called Lucas to see how his parents had reacted. He was sad to hear both Lucas and Dustin were grounded until further notice.

Mike felt guilty. He had been the one who got them to sneak out. He felt bad with both their punishments and the fact that his mom had been so easy on him.

He also felt guilty because he was just a *little* glad that the two of them wouldn't be around when he went to go and visit El.

He wasn't sure yet what his feelings were for her, but he knew he'd get a little less teasing if Dustin and Lucas weren't there.

At dinnertime his parents asked him more about Eleven, and while he answered their questions, there were still a few things he didn't share; mainly about the bad men still out there. He wasn't sure how much he was supposed to share, even with his family. When Hopper concocted the story of what had happened to Will, he hadn't shared every detail with the Wheeler parents.

A few miles away at the Byers, Eleven was getting ready for bed. After an awkward, fully clothed explanation on how to take a shower from Joyce, Eleven emerged from the bathroom feeling sparkly and

clean. As she sat on Will's bed, she crawled under the covers to get ready to go to sleep.

Will entered the room. The two hadn't really talked since the other boys had left; he wasn't sure what to say to her, and Eleven didn't talk much, anyway.

Still, she had been grateful for the clothes which had surprisingly fit her. She was a few inches taller than Will.

"I'm just getting some pajamas," Will explained, going to his dresser.

Eleven tilted her head. "Pajamas?"

Will took some out, held them up. "Clothes you wear when you go to sleep. My mom will have to get you some." He looked around the room. "Are you comfortable? Do you need anything?"

She shook her head.

Will looked at the floor for a second, then back up. Walking over, he sat next to her on the bed. "If you...I don't know...need to talk to somebody about where you were...you can talk to me. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, nodding.

He gave her a smile, and got off the bed. "Well...I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"She asked about you this morning," Will told Mike after school the next day, as the boys rode home together.

"El?"

Will nodded.

Mike sighed. Will had been late to school today, and the two had barely had any time to talk. On the forefront of Mike's mind the entire day had been the girl sleeping in Will's bed.

“You gonna come over?” Will asked.

“I’ve got to do my homework, first,” Mike said. Because it was Friday, he was hoping his parents would grant him a reprieve and let him do the homework he’d missed on Thursday over the weekend.

“Your mom is so cool,” Lucas grumbled, riding between Will and Mike. “I’ve got to do the homework I missed and then let me think...oh! Stay home,” he said, shaking his head.

“At least your parents let you keep your video games,” Dustin said. “My Atari is locked up in my dad’s safe.”

“I’m really sorry, guys,” Mike told them.

“Nothing we can do, now,” Lucas muttered.

Eventually they all rode their separate directions, with Mike telling Will that he’d be over soon.

When Mike arrived home his mother wasn’t home, but a note on the fridge told him that when she returned she expected to see him sitting at the table, working on his homework. He groaned, but followed her instructions.

He was still working on his missed assignments when she came home with Holly on her hip an hour later.

“Can I go now?” Mike asked hopefully. By now it was 5:30 and he wanted to have plenty of time to spend with Eleven.

However those hopes were dashed as his mom shook her head. “It doesn’t look like your homework is finished.” When he looked as if he was about to argue, she added “I’m giving you a pass on your chores today, but your homework has to be done.”

Unfortunately by the time he finished it was dinner time, and his father, who felt Karen had gone too easy on Mike the previous day, forbid him from leaving the house after eating.

Mike wanted to get angry, but was afraid an outburst would prevent him from seeing El. So he nodded, cleared his plate, and sulked up to

his room.

He called El to tell her the bad news.

“Oh,” she said, not able to hide the disappointment in her voice.

They talked for a few minutes, with Mike telling her about his day and asking what she’d been up to. When she couldn’t explain much about how she’d occupied her day, he asked if she was bored.

“Bored?” she repeated.

“It means when you don’t have anything fun to do,” he explained.

“Yes. Bored.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll come over tomorrow, and hopefully you won’t be bored anymore.”

“Cool.”

Mike woke up extra early the next morning (Saturday) to do his chores. He cleaned his room, washed the dishes after breakfast, and organized the living room before his parents gave him the go-ahead to see El.

Last night after finding out Eleven was bored, he’d had an idea. Grabbing his backpack, he found what he needed and, after grabbing some of his allowance money, headed out.

It was a sunny and surprisingly warm October day as he pedaled away from his house. After a brief pit stop, he rode over to the Byers. When he arrived, he tossed his bike in front of the house and carried his backpack to the door.

Jonathan let him in. Walking past him, he saw Will and Eleven sitting at the table as they finished their breakfast.

Will smiled as his friend entered, and El smiled her small smile that Mike loved.

"I got something for you, El," Mike said, taking his backpack off. Unzipping it, he came out with what he'd got on his pit stop-a box of Eggos.

Her small smile got bigger, and she all but snatched them from his hands, making him laugh.

As Joyce came into the room and saw Eleven opening the box of Eggos, prepared to devour one, she stopped her, saying "No, no, no. Toast them, first."

Eleven tilted her head in confusion.

So Mike and Will spent the next few minutes showing El how to use the toaster to brown her waffles. The trio consumed almost the entire box; Will and Mike each having one while El ate three.

After eating, Will stayed to clear the tables and wash dishes. Mike went with El to her temporary bedroom.

She sat on the bed, while he stood next to it.

"I got you something else," he told her as he unzipped his backpack once more. This time, instead of reaching in and pulling something out, he turned it over and poured the contents onto the bed. As he did, a pile of books poured onto the bed. Eleven looked at them quizzically.

"Um," Mike said, spreading them out. "You said you were bored yesterday, so I thought you might want some stuff to read. I didn't know, what...you know...like, or anything, so I got some so you can have choices and stuff."

What he didn't say was that he was unsure of how well she could read, and had brought a variety for her to find the right level.

He'd brought some books he enjoyed reading, mostly sci-fi books- *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* , *Choose Your Own Adventure* , and *The Hobbit* , to name a few. He also thought Eleven, being a girl, may want something to read catered towards her and, not knowing what to get, had borrowed some of Nancy's old Tiger Beat magazines. He'd also got some books Holly didn't read anymore, as well as a few

comic books.

He watched nervously as Eleven looked at the covers, spreading them around. She opened one of his books, looked at a page, then kept looking. Finally she selected one of Holly's books, a book with an orange cover. Then she looked up at Mike and smiled.

Mike began gathering the other books. "I can leave these here, in case you want to look at them later."

"Will you read this to me?" she asked, holding up the orange book.

"Yeah, okay," he said, nodding. He went to sit on the edge of the bed, but El, her back against the headboard, scooted over to make room for him next to her.

Mike, not sure if it was okay or not for him to sit with her on the bed, shrugged his shoulders and sat next to her, opening the book. He began reading:

I am Sam. Sam I am. That Sam-I-am! That Sam-I-am! I do not like That Sam-I-am! Do you like Green eggs and ham?

When Will finished the dishes, he went to see what Mike and Eleven were doing. When he got to his room, he paused in the doorway. The two were on the bed, El's head on Mike's shoulder as he read to her. She was paying more attention to his face, it seemed, than the book. Mike turned to her and said something quietly, which caused he and Eleven to giggle. Will smiled, and decided to give them some privacy.

6. Help Me

Eleven (October)

“Papa!”

She cried, and she cried, but he wasn’t helping her; he wasn’t coming.

The two men carried her by her arms, down the hallway to the room. She was all too familiar with that room. It was her punishment for not listening to Papa, no matter what he asked.

She tried to kick away as they came within a few feet of the door, but to no avail. Once they got to the doorway, the two men tossed her inside like garbage.

But today was different. She wasn’t taking it anymore.

Getting right back up, she looked to the man still in the doorway and, using her mind, pushed him forcefully into the wall.

The second man came back, weapon raised, but with a slight turn of her neck, his neck twisted and he fell to the floor, dead.

She wiped the blood away as she heard footsteps approaching. “Papa?”

But it wasn’t him. Instead, it was Joyce, Dustin, Lucas, Will, and worst of all...Mike. They stood in the doorway looking at the crumpled bodies on the floor.

“Eleven, what have you done?” Joyce asked, fear creeping into her voice.

“I...they...hurt me,” Eleven stuttered.

Mike looked at her, terror in his eyes. She reached for him. “Mike....”

He backed up, shaking his head. “You’re a freak. And a murderer. Stay away from me.”

“Mike!”

With a gasp, Eleven woke up, so startled by her dream that she knocked over the chair at Will’s desk with her mind.

Panting, she tried to calm herself down.

It was only a dream. It was only a dream .

Well, not a dream, exactly. Joyce had told her that they were called “nightmares.” And she’d been having them a lot since she came back.

Upset by this most recent one, she started to cry softly. She lay back in the bed, hugging her pillow.

There came a knock at the door, and then Joyce’s soft voice. “El? Are you okay?”

Eleven choked back a sob, barely, as the woman entered the room. All it took was one look at the sad girl in Will’s bed to get Joyce to cradle her in comfort. Eleven cried into her shoulder.

“Shh, shh,” Joyce said, rubbing her back. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

She had now been back for a week. It was, to be honest, a difficult transition for everyone in the Byers household.

For Joyce, it meant setting another place at the table, comforting this new addition to her home, and treating her like the daughter she’d never had. The latter was easy; Joyce had always wanted a daughter. What she struggled with sometimes was making sure there was enough food (the girl was ravenous) and making sure she had enough money for clothes and other things the young girl needed. Which meant extra shifts at work.

Not to say Joyce was unhappy; she loved having Eleven stay with her, even if she had to keep it a secret. It tugged at her heart when the young girl would smile, or the one or two times she’d actually

giggle at something one of her friends would say. On her days off she would sit and read with her, after finding out Eleven appeared to be on an elementary grade reading level.

For Jonathan and Will, they had to get used to having a girl in the house. With their mother at work most of the time, they tried to hold back their burping, farting, and especially roughhousing in front of El. They'd explained to Eleven that they were just playing, but the first time they'd wrestled each other in front of her she thought they were attacking one another, and had used her mind to separate the two.

Jonathan, the house cook, didn't mind making extra plates for Eleven, and started to like the idea of having a little sister. Like Joyce, he would read with her on nights where Mike couldn't make it or his mother was working. He also worked with her on expanding her vocabulary and introduced her to music.

With Will, it took a little longer. He and Eleven didn't dislike each other; it was just that both felt more comfortable when their friends were around. Still, Will would sit with her and read from time to time, lend her some clothes, and would even draw with her sometimes. Her pictures never came out as good as his, but he was encouraging and upbeat.

Dustin and Lucas' grounding was eventually lifted, and the boys would come over most days to sit with Eleven, play games, or just talk. Eleven still didn't add too much to the conversation, but she enjoyed hearing the boys tell her what they did when she wasn't with them.

Hopper would come by and check on the Byers clan every so often to see how everyone was adjusting to the new situation. A few times he would try and slip Joyce a few dollars to help out with El, but she always turned him down.

And Mike. Oh, Mike. While she liked all of her friends, even Joyce, Jonathan, and Will, Eleven knew she liked Mike more. It was something about how patient he was with her, and how just his presence made her feel at ease. She liked being at the Byers, and having a bed, but a big part of her wish she could have stayed over at

Mike's.

He would come over more often than not to spend time with her, usually reading or showing her how to play a particular game. And she didn't know why, but the sound of his voice became one of her favorite things to hear.

She also felt, and she didn't know how to explain it, something *else* for Mike. From time to time the memory of them sitting in the school would come back to her and make her smile. She wanted to know what it meant, when Mike put his mouth on hers. It had been nice, and part of her wanted to do it again, but she didn't know the meaning of it. All she knew was that when he did that, it was as if he'd turned on a switch; and she didn't want it to go off.

Sometimes the two of them would be alone, sitting on the bed, reading; or even when they were with their friends, she would stare at him. When he would look her way she would turn her head. A few times she caught him doing the same thing. Sometimes they would be reading and he would hold her hand, which also made her feel good. And although she enjoyed Lucas and Dustin, she couldn't imagine holding their hands and feeling as good.

The next time she had a nightmare was the day before Halloween. She'd dreamt that she was back in the Upside Down, being chased by the six-legged creature. It had cornered her, in Will's bedroom, and she'd turned around and killed it. But after she did so, it changed into Mike. She woke up, screaming this time. Joyce again rushed into the room and held her.

"It's alright, you're safe," Joyce said, rocking Eleven.

"It was about Mike," El muttered between tears.

Joyce was surprised; Eleven had never offered to share what happened in her nightmares, and Joyce hadn't asked. When Will had first returned, he was the same. He would wake up crying or, in a few instances, wet the bed and try to hide the sheets out of embarrassment. Joyce had never asked him about his nightmares,

either. Instead she waited for the boy to open up when he was ready; the same rang true with Eleven.

“What happened?” Joyce now asked the girl.

“I...hurt him,” she said, then buried her face in Joyce’s shoulder.

“Shh, shh,” Joyce said, rubbing her back. “It was just a nightmare, El. Besides, the way you two look at each other, I know you would never hurt him.”

Eleven cried for a few more moments. When her tears had dried up, Joyce tucked her back into bed.

After she’d left and turned off the lights, Eleven lay awake, staring at the ceiling. She thought about what Joyce had said: *The way you two look at each other* . Did she look differently at Mike? She supposed she did, but she didn’t know it was noticeable to anyone else. She thought about what he’d said that night in the school; *someone that you like and not a friend* . She still wasn’t sure what that meant. And even though she was unsure of what it meant by him putting his mouth on hers, she knew it was something special, something you don’t do with everyone. She had no inkling to do that with anyone else besides Mike.

On Halloween, after Joyce had some talks with Hopper, Eleven was allowed to go trick or treating with the boys, as long as she stayed covered up and Jonathan went with them. The boys decided to go with a Star Wars theme; Lucas went as Darth Vader, Dustin went as Chewbacca, Will as Luke Skywalker, Mike as Han Solo, and Eleven went as Princess Leia.

Eleven was excited, as she got to finally leave the house since she’d arrived at the Byers. And the boys had been hyping up Halloween for a while now.

The boys arrived in their costumes. And Eleven couldn’t help but feel warm and fuzzy when Mike blushed upon seeing her in her Leia costume.

“Pretty?” she asked, twirling.

“Yeah,” Mike answered.

While they waited for Will to change, the other boys told her what to expect. Mike told her not to be scared, and that anything “scary” she saw was just fake. When Will came from his bedroom in his Luke gear, the group left.

They piled into Jonathan’s car and drove to Mike and Lucas’ neighborhood, since there were more houses there. And over the next two hours they went from door to door, shouting “trick or treat” and filling their pillowcases with candy. Although there were a few things that frightened Eleven (a trick or treater in a Jason Voorhies mask, and a kid in a creepy Cabbage Patch Kids mask), overall she enjoyed trick or treating, and was sad when it was over.

Jonathan dropped off Lucas and Dustin first, while Will fell asleep against the door in the backseat. Mike and Eleven went through their candy, Mike trading with her when she saw some of his that looked better.

When they got to the Wheeler home, she gave him a hug before he got out of the car. After pulling away, Mike looked at her like he wanted to say something, or *do* something, but instead he smiled and said he’d see her tomorrow.

When she went got into bed that night, Mike’s eyes were in the back of her mind. Specifically, the look on his face before he got out of the car. It was similar to the look he’d had on his face when they were in the basement bathroom in his home a year ago. She had moved closer to him to...to what, she didn’t know. All she knew was at that moment she wanted to be close to him.

It got her thinking again, about “someone you like.” She knew she liked Mike more than the other boys, and she got the feeling he might feel the same way. But...

Mike was so *good* . And she...she was not. She wondered if all of her new friends knew how many bad things she’d done in the lab, what would they think of her. What would Mike think of her?

Those thoughts kept her up until sleep finally overtook her.

Hopper (November)

Jim Hopper had his hands full, what with sheriffing the small town as well as keeping tabs on the Ives girl; Jane, or Eleven.

He would try and stop by the Byers' home a few times a week to see how things were going. So far, so good. A big part of it was checking in to make sure the girl (as well as the family) were okay. But another part was for him to assuage his guilt. After all, it was *his* idea to practically sell out the kid. Even though it got them Will back, Hopper couldn't shake the guilty feeling he'd get whenever he laid eyes on Eleven.

That had been a big part of the reason he'd started dropping food in the box after she'd disappeared. If it was his fault she was gone, at least he could try and help her survive in that God-awful-place.

Joyce had asked him about letting the girl go trick or treating. And he'd been reluctant, as he still didn't have a solution for the men looking for her, but figured with it being Halloween, and everybody being dressed up, it'd be easier for her to blend in. And besides, the girl hadn't left the house in weeks.

What Joyce and everyone else didn't know was that he had followed the kids as they trick or treated, just to be on the safe side. Jonathan Byers was a good kid, but he wouldn't stand a chance if the government people had found out about little Leia. So Hopper had, the best he could, tracked them in his truck. It'd been no easy feat, as his truck wasn't exactly conspicuous, and the older teens in town tended to get drunk and vandalize during Halloween, keeping the police busy. Thankfully, Callahan and Powell had done a bang up job holding down the fort.

A few days after Halloween he was awoken by a knock on his door.

When he went to open it, he was both surprised and not when it turned out to be a government man. It was the same man that had talked to him in the back of the car the night the girl went missing.

“Can I come in?” the man asked.

Hopper snorted. “Like I have a choice?” he asked, moving aside.

The man walked in and looked around the cramped living room. “Geez, don’t you ever clean up?”

“You guys have been watching me,” Hopper said, closing the door. “You should know.” He took his pack of cigarettes from a nearby counter, stuck it in his mouth.

He had met with the government men one other time since that first night. They’d shown up at work, and he’d sat in his office and told them he hadn’t found anything out yet. But that was over a week ago.

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told you last time,” Hopper said, lighting then taking a drag on the cigarette. “Nobody’s seen her.”

The man, still standing, smiled and nodded his head. “And how hard have you been looking?”

Hopper held up his hands. “Hey, you just told me to ask, and I did. I did my part.”

The man nodded, and added “Well, my superiors think otherwise. They sent me here to give you an ultimatum. You have until Thanksgiving. Turn this town inside out, kick in some doors, do whatever it is you have to do. Because if you can’t find her, we will. And we won’t go about it as...professional...as you.”

Hopper squinted at the man. “Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s just a statement of fact, Mr. Hopper.”

“Chief Hopper,” he corrected, stubbing out his cigarette. Nodding to the door, he said, “Get out of my house.”

The man smiled. It took all of Jim's strength not to punch him then and there.

Over the course of the next few weeks he made some calls, took some trips, and tried to do so as low key as possible. When Thanksgiving came around, he had a plan.

He had been so busy thinking of his deadline and his plan that he was surprised when, on one of his weekly trips to the Byers, Joyce invited him over for Thanksgiving.

"Oh, no," he'd said, shaking his head. "You don't want me around."

"Hop, don't be silly," Joyce had responded. "It's the least we could do, with all the help you've given us this past month."

Still, he'd shaken his head. "Joyce, thank you, but..."

"But nothing," she'd said. "You're coming."

So, lo and behold, there he was on Thanksgiving Day, wearing his wrinkled blue dress shirt and black tie. Unsure of what to bring, he'd brought over a fruit cake for dessert.

The dinner was nice; Hopper and Joyce, Will and Jonathan, Eleven, and even Mike Wheeler had shown up, looking dashing in a sweater and tie.

"Your folks aren't having Thanksgiving dinner?" Hopper had asked him once everyone was eating.

"No, they are," Mike had said, "But.." his cheeks had a hint of red in them.

"He wanted to be here for Eleven's first Thanksgiving," Will finished for his friend.

"Oh. That's nice of you," Hopper said. Joyce threw him a glance that said *they're so obvious*. And she was right, though Hopper kind of admired the way Mike doted on the girl, quietly explaining the food

to her and answering questions. And the way she looked at him, Hopper knew there was something between the two.

After dinner Hopper and Joyce were sitting at the table smoking while Jonathan and Will cleaned the kitchen, with Mike teaching Eleven a card game in the next room.

“So,” Joyce began, talking quietly. “Any word on...” and she nodded at Eleven.

Hopper took a long drag, and shook his head. Exhaling, he said “I’ve got something in place. Kind of. If it works, things will be taken care of. If not...”

“What?”

Hopper shrugged. “Well, then, I might be out of a job.”

“Hop, don’t...”

“Everytime I look at that girl,” he said, glancing at Eleven, “I feel guilty. With all the shit she’s been through...”

“We wouldn’t have gotten Will. What did you want to do, let him die in there?”

“No, but...” he stubbed out his cigarette in a nearby ashtray. “What happened to that girl, that’s on me. And I’m going to do what I have to to fix it.” He sighed, and stood up. “Well. Thanks for everything, Joyce.” Then, louder, said “Alright, everybody. Thanks for having me over. Happy Thanksgiving.”

The kids responded with a round of “Happy Thanksgiving” in return.

Joyce followed him outside. “Hopper, just be careful, okay?” she asked.

He nodded. “I’ll let you know how it turns out. Thanks again.”

She’d given him a small smile and nodded as he got into his car. Starting the ignition, he turned around and headed home.

The next morning he was already awake and eating a bowl of cereal when two men showed up at his door. Opening it for them, he let them inside and offered them coffee, which they declined.

The man from last time asked “Well?”

“I didn’t find her,” Hopper said, taking his bowl to the sink.

“Well, then, I’m sorry, but...”

“But nothing. You want to, what? Tear this town apart looking for a little girl? A girl that your lab took away from her mother, all so that you could experiment on her? Surely you have other kids out there you can use.”

“Mister Hopper,” the man said, rolling his eyes. “We just want...”

“*Chief* Hopper,” he corrected. “What if I went to Terry Ives, huh? And told her that you took her kid. What if I went to the news, and...”

“Who’s going to believe you, huh? Terry Ives is a nutcase who claims we took her daughter. There’s no proof, no records...”

“But you did take her, didn’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s our word against yours.”

“But you’ve got to have other kids you can...”

“That girl was the first to show superhuman abilities, Chief. We are serving our country.” The government man was sounding agitated, surely sick of this conversation. “”So *what* if we took her from her mother? We would do it again and again if that’s what it takes.”

Hopper smiled. “You sure about that?”

The man looked confused. “Why are you smiling?”

Still smiling, Hopper held up the coffee maker. “This damn thing hasn’t worked since you guys ransacked my place.” Holding it near

his mouth, he said “Billy, I hope you got all that.” Then, turning it so they could see it’s bottom, he unscrewed it, revealing a microphone—the same one they’d used in his house a year ago.

Holding the mic, Hopper said “Let me tell you how this is going to work. My friend, Billy, is listening in at another location. If this goes any further, he turns it into the newspaper.”

The government man sighed. “What is it you want?”

“You’re going to leave the town alone. You’re going to go back to your lab, experiment with gerbils, or monkeys, or some other kind of animal, but you’re gonna leave little kids in this town alone.”

The government man narrowed his eyes. “You know where she is, don’t you?”

Hopper shook his head. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“And what if we tell the people of this town...”

“Go ahead and tell them,” Hopper said, shrugging. “My buddy Billy will release this. Who do you think comes out worse?”

The man sighed, and gave a curt nod. “This isn’t over.” He turned to leave.

“Yes it is,” Hopper said, grinning.

When the two men had left, Hopper put the microphone on the kitchen table. In truth, there was no Billy. He *was* using the mic to record the conversation, however. Since the week the government man had visited him, he’d done some research and found someone who could turn the bug into a recorder. When he woke up this morning, he’d set it in the coffee maker, and began recording.

He hoped, for the little girl’s sake, that it had worked.

Mike (December)

Mike Wheeler couldn't help but think about Eleven. A *lot* . She'd been at the forefront of his mind for a year after she'd disappeared. And now that she was back, and relatively safe, he still couldn't help but continue to think about her.

At first it was just whether or not she was okay. Once it turned out she was fine, just a little shaken up, her nightmares had kicked in.

Apparently they'd happened quite a few times when she'd first returned, but Will didn't share that with the boys. They'd gone away for a while, then reappeared in the middle of November. There had been a few times where Mike tried to come over, but either Joyce or Will would tell him that she wasn't feeling up to it. After some prodding, Will confided to Mike that Eleven had been having bad nightmares about the Upside Down.

Mike had nodded, not really knowing what to say. He knew Will had had some...difficulties...after he came back. There were times he'd show up to school late looking like a zombie from lack of sleep. The first month he would jump at random sounds. And at some of their sleepovers, Will had woken up in a cold sweat, or screaming.

With time, though, it went away. Will didn't like to talk about his time in that place, so Mike and the boys never bugged him about it.

With Eleven, though, Mike felt the need to help her. Not that he hadn't want to help Will; Mike just felt an indescribable *need* to protect El.

In his 13 years, Mike Wheeler hadn't had too many crushes. In fourth grade he *kind of* liked Veronica Jones. Then, last year, he'd *sort of* thought Jennifer Hayes was pretty. Then Will had gone missing and they'd stumbled across a girl in the rain. What had started off as just caring for her had turned into friendship which had then turned into...something. A crush, he guessed.

Actually, he didn't guess, he *knew* .

He knew from the sadness he'd felt when she had disappeared in

front of his eyes. He knew from the emptiness he felt during her nearly-year long absence. He knew because when he'd kissed her in the lunchroom last year, it had felt *right* . And he knew because, everytime she looked at him, and everytime she smiled at him, he felt he could do anything.

So, yeah, he would admit to himself that he had a crush on Eleven. (A *big* one, Lucas had told him one day). And with it came that desire to help her in any way he could.

So when he found out that she'd been having nightmares again, he sat down with her one weekend in November, before he left to return home.

"El?"

"Yes?"

"Um...I know you've been having, uh...nightmares."

She'd looked at her lap in embarrassment.

"It's okay, El. I had nightmares all the time when you were, you know...gone."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I dreamt that you were hurt, or that you were in danger and I couldn't save you. Sometimes I dreamt you were trying to talk to me, and I couldn't see you." He shook his head. "I would wake up and...." he trailed off, embarrassed to say.

"Cry?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I cry, too," she told him.

"If you ever can't sleep, El, or have a bad nightmare, just...call me on Will's Supercomm, okay? Even if I'm asleep I'll wake up and talk to you, I'll try and make you feel better, alright?"

She nodded. "Thanks, Mike."

In the weeks that followed she called him a few times in the middle of the night, crying. Part of him wanted to slip on his shoes and go see her, but he knew he'd get grounded. So instead he would talk to her over the walkie, and tell her stories to calm her down or until one of them fell asleep.

At Thanksgiving (which he'd begged his parents to let him spend with El) Will told him that she still had nightmares, even when she wasn't calling Mike. Apparently she and Will talked sometimes about their experiences. Well, Will talked. Although Eleven was getting better at stringing together sentences, she was still soft spoken.

The first Monday in December brought the winter's first snowfall. As the boys arrived at school and shook off the light snowflakes from their coats, Mike looked up and saw the student-made sign advertising the Snow Ball next week.

A few days prior, Hopper had told everyone the big news: for the time being, Eleven didn't have anyone looking for her.

No one had been happier than Mike, because it meant she could leave the Byers house now.

And better yet-he could take her to the dance.

So when school let out, he headed over to see El. He tried to go alone, not wanting to ask her in front of their friends-at least Lucas and Dustin-but they tagged along anyway.

When they arrived at the Byers', the other boys rushed in, with Mike bringing up the rear. Lucas and Dustin went on about the science project they had to complete by Christmas break, with Will adding in a few things every now and then. Mike chimed in every so often, but was mostly quiet. A few times he caught Eleven looking his way. Their eyes would meet, then he'd look somewhere else.

Eventually the boys decided they had to go home and begin working on homework; Mike stuck behind.

After seeing their friends go, the three kids left-Mike, Eleven, and Will-went back to El/Will's bedroom. Will started talking about his latest drawing, but Mike cut him off when Eleven left to use the bathroom.

"Hey, Will? Do you mind if I, uh...talk to Eleven alone when she comes back?"

Will looked confused. "Why?"

"No reason."

Will nodded, but it looked as if he knew something was up. Nevertheless, when Eleven returned from the bathroom a few minutes later, Will excused himself.

She gave a small smile to Mike, and sat next to him on the bed.

"Um, El?" he asked her.

"Yes?"

"Um..."he rubbed the back of his neck. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Okay." She turned to face him.

"Do you, uh...remember last year, I asked you about going to the Snow Ball?"

Her eyes widened as she recalled the better events of that night. She nodded, then said "I'm sorry I couldn't go."

"No, El," he said, rubbing her arm. "Don't be sorry." Continuing, he said "Well, um...there's another Snow Ball next week, and I wanted to know if you'd, um...go with me."

He watched as another small smile came to her face, but it just as quickly disappeared as she looked at her lap.

"Why?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Mike looked confused. "Why what?"

"Why do you want to go...with me?"

"Because, I...I like you, El."

She pulled her knees to her chest and shook her head.

"What's wrong? Did I say something?"

She turned to him, her eyes welling with tears.

"El?" he asked, concerned. He hated seeing her this upset.

"You shouldn't like me. I'm not...good."

"What?" he asked, flabbergasted. "Of course you are. Why would you say that?"

She sniffed, wiped away a tear. "I hurt people. I...kill people. But you are...so good, Mike. Better than me. So...you should go...with someone good." She shook her head. "I'm bad."

"El, you're the only person I wanna go with," he said. "And don't say you're bad. You're one of the best people I know."

She looked at him, tears going down her face. "I don't want to...hurt you."

"You won't," he said, taking the back of his sleeve to wipe her tears. When she looked back at him with those brown eyes, he felt a sudden urge to lean in and kiss her. He didn't, of course; he just wanted to make her see herself how he saw her. "El, I trust you. I know you're not going to hurt me."

She sniffed again, shaking her head.

"Those guys, the bad men," he continued, "they did terrible things to you. You did what you had to to survive. But you're a *good* person, El, I know it. I know it in my heart. You wouldn't have saved us, or helped with Will if you were a bad person. So don't...don't ever say you're bad, because it isn't true."

She looked back at him. "Promise?"

He nodded. "Friends don't lie."

She pulled her knees down, and wiped away the few remaining tears on her face. Laying her head on his shoulder, she said, "Thank you, Mike."

"You're welcome," he said, pulling her in for a half-hug.

The two sat there quietly for a moment until Eleven broke the silence. "Yes."

"What?"

"Yes, to the...Snow Ball."

Mike smiled, and pulled her closer. "That's great, El. I can't wait."

Eleven finally let a smile come to her face. Mike couldn't stop smiling. He was finally going to take Eleven to the Snow Ball.

Notes for the Chapter:

I had mixed thoughts on this one, so if you liked it, I'd like to know. The remaining chapters will (hopefully) be only once a week; my job is requiring more attention. The next chapter, when it's up, will focus on the two getting ready for and attending the Snow Ball. Thanks for reading.

7. Promises to Keep

The next day was a warm December day, melting some of the snow that had fallen the day prior. By the time it was lunchtime at school, small puddles had formed around the building.

As Mike joined his friends at their lunch table, he debated whether or not to tell them about his “date” with Eleven. He no doubt knew that Will was already aware of it, but so far his friend hadn't said anything about it.

He was so lost in thought that he didn't notice Dustin saying his name as he sat next to Will.

“Earth to Mike,” Dustin said, waving his hand in front of Mike's face. The curly haired boy was sitting across from him.

“What?” Mike asked.

“Did you do the history homework last night? I totally forgot about it.”

“Yeah, I did it” Mike said, nonchalantly.

“Dammit, I'm so screwed,” Dustin said.

“Who's screwed?” Lucas asked as he joined his friends, sitting next to Dustin. Will was on Mike's right.

“Me,” Dustin said, finishing his pudding. “I forgot to do Mr. Klein's homework.”

“Don't you already have an A in that class?” Lucas asked.

“Well, yeah, but...”

Mike figured now was as good a time as any. “Hey, uh, guys?” The other boys looked up at him. “I'm taking El to the Snow Ball.”

“You are?” Will asked, surprised.

Mike turned to him, confusion on his face. “She didn’t tell you?”

Will shook his head. “No. After you left, we had dinner, then she went to sleep.”

Mike didn’t know what to make of that; the dance was a big deal to him, was it not a big deal to her?

He looked at Dustin and Lucas, surprised at their lack of reaction. Lucas shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, we knew something like this was going to happen eventually,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s not exactly a secret that you two like each other,” Dustin added. “So is she gonna be, like, your girlfriend now?”

Mike shook his head; both nervous and relieved to be talking about this with his friends. “It’s just a dance, Dustin,” he said, attempting to downplay it. Though he had been wondering the same thing himself.

The thought of being the first of his friends to have a girlfriend was exciting enough, but even better was the thought of having *El* as his girlfriend. However, he didn’t think she had the faintest idea of what that kind of relationship entailed; honestly, he wasn’t sure *he* knew. All he knew was that he cared for Eleven in a way he’d never cared for anyone before.

In her bedroom at the Byers, Eleven was just waking up. She had slept peacefully last night, aided by Mike’s kind words to her.

A smile came to her lips as she thought about something: *Snow Ball. With Mike* .

It slowly dawned on her that she didn’t know what was supposed to happen at this Snow Ball. Mike had said that you “dance around” but she didn’t know what that meant.

She was currently alone in the house, as Joyce was at work and both Will and Jonathan were at school. Padding into the kitchen, she went and looked out the window over the sink at the slowly melting snow. She had been hoping to go outside when her friends came over to

play in it, after hearing Will talk about it at dinner last night.

Deciding that she couldn't wait, she opened the door that led outside. Going down the steps into the backyard, she shivered at the cold. Although the snow was melting, the ground was still primarily covered in the white flakes, and she bent down and scooped some into her hands. She smiled as she felt the cold slush cool her fingers.

She took off one of her shoes and put her toes into the snow, and immediately regretted it, as it made her even colder. Awkwardly hopping on one foot, she ambled back into the house.

As she went inside, she heard keys at the front door. She managed to wipe off the snow on her foot just as the door opened, and Joyce entered the house.

Their eyes meeting, Joyce said "Hi, honey. I brought you a chicken salad sandwich, thought you might be hungry."

Eleven was, of course. It had become a routine now that Joyce would come home and spend her lunch break with Eleven, since the girl spent most of the day by herself. Joyce almost always brought something new for Eleven to try.

The two sat at the table, Eleven hungrily eating the sandwich as Joyce smiled and watched. "So," Joyce asked, glancing at the door leading to the backyard, "Been outside?"

Sandwich in her mouth, Eleven looked up with a timid expression. Joyce smiled back at her.

"It's okay," Joyce said. "Just don't leave the backyard. What did you think of the snow?"

Eleven swallowed what was in her mouth. "Cold."

Joyce nodded her head.

"Momma," Eleven said, putting the sandwich down.

"Yes?"

“What does ‘dance around’ mean?”

Joyce looked surprised. “It means dancing, jumping up and down. Why?”

“Mike asked me to the Snow Ball.”

Joyce couldn’t contain the giddiness that erupted inside her. “Awww, he did?” When Eleven nodded, she continued, “That is so sweet of him. When is it?”

El shrugged her shoulders.

“Well,” Joyce said, sighing, “I’m going to have to get you a dress.”

“Dress?”

“Yes, sweetie, you’re supposed to dress nice for dances like the Snow Ball.” Suddenly, Joyce put a hand to her head. “Dammit.”

Eleven looked at her curiously.

“I don’t know if I’m going to have time to take you to get a dress. With Christmas coming up, Donald’s got me working almost non-stop. Oh! You know what? Maybe Mike’s sister, Nancy, can take you.”

Eleven nodded. So Joyce called Karen Wheeler and asked if she could ask her eldest daughter for the favor. When it was time for Joyce to return to work, she and Eleven hugged goodbye, and El went to go look at books until the boys came home.

Her friends arrived two hours later. They immediately recruited El to join them outside so she could experience the snow first hand. They showed her how to make a snowman, and with Dustin’s instruction, she made a snow angel. Jonathan came home while they were outside, and he tossed a snowball at Will, igniting a snowball fight. Eleven giddily joined in. Eventually the fight died down, and Jonathan went inside to change clothes.

Mike went in soon after, wanting to warm up; Lucas, Will, and Dustin stayed out, still tossing snowballs at one another. Eleven followed Mike inside.

Taking off their shoes, the two sat at the table. Turning his chair towards her so they were nearly knee to knee, Mike said, "Did you tell Ms. Byers about the Snow Ball?"

Eleven nodded. "Yes."

"Oh, okay," Mike said, relief flooding his face.

"She said I have to get a dress."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, and I have to wear a suit." He made a face.

"You don't like suit?" she asked.

Mike shook his head. "Not really."

"Then why?"

He shrugged. "Because you're supposed to look nice at school dances."

"No, why...go, if you don't want to wear suit?"

"Because I...I want to go with you," he said.

She grinned, and nodded her head as he took her hands into his. "Um...El..."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when I said that school dances are with someone you like?"

She nodded.

"Um..." He paused, not knowing how to continue. He wanted to talk about a boyfriend/girlfriend scenario, but didn't know how to go about it.

“Not a friend?” she asked, remembering.

“Yeah, um...” He was so mad at himself, getting tongue tied all of a sudden. Sensing his frustration, Eleven ran her thumb over his knuckles. He looked up at her. “Um...well...the guys aren’t coming. It’s just going to be you and me.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

He grinned, and looked at their hands. Looking back up at her, he began to say something else, but her brown eyes and small smile were too much for him. Almost without realizing it, he began to lean in towards her.

Eleven, seeing what Mike was doing, felt her heart beat harder in her chest as she, too, leaned towards him.

The two were interrupted when the front door swung open, with Dustin saying “It was an accident!”

Mike and Eleven jumped back in their chairs as their friends came in, Lucas holding a hand over his eye.

“What happened?” Mike asked, standing up.

“Dustin got snow in my eye,” Lucas said.

“Not on purpose,” Dustin contended.

The boys spent the next half hour indoors as Lucas flushed his eye, getting the snow out. Eventually it was time for everyone to return to their own home. Eleven gave her friends a hug before they left, with her hug for Mike lasting a little bit longer than the others.

Saturday afternoon Nancy picked Eleven up from the Byers’. The two girls made their way into downtown Hawkins, where they searched for a dress for Eleven. Joyce had left some money but Karen Wheeler had added some as well, saying that since Mike was going with El, she wanted to help out.

The two eventually found a dress at the mall downtown. It caught Eleven's eye right away; a pink, shimmery dress with some ruffles, and little hearts decorating it.

Touching it, Eleven quietly said, "Pretty."

"It is," Nancy admitted, glancing at the price tag. It was a little more expensive than she thought, but the money both Joyce and her mother had provided would pay for it.

The two paid for the dress and then Nancy decided to take Eleven to lunch. There was a food court in the mall, and after choosing what they wanted to eat, the two girls sat at a table, with Eleven quickly devouring her food.

"Are you excited for the dance?" Nancy asked.

Eleven nodded.

Nancy smiled. "Mike is, too."

"Is dance hard?" Eleven asked between bites.

"You don't know how to dance?" Nancy asked her. Eleven shook her head. "I'll have to show you, then. Maybe when we leave here. Although, you might not have too much to worry about. Mike isn't the most coordinated person, so you might just be slow dancing."

Eleven looked confused. "Slow?"

"Yeah." Nancy smiled, shaking her head. "Sometimes I forget how much you don't know."

Eleven looked down at her food, embarrassed.

"No, no," Nancy said, touching El's hand. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be mean or anything. I just...sometimes I forget that you didn't grow up like me. I'm sorry. Really."

Eleven shyly smiled, accepting the apology.

She ate quietly for a few minutes until something caught her eye. A

few tables over, a man was leaning over and putting his mouth onto a woman's. As they pulled apart from one another, Eleven asked, "What's that?"

Nancy looked over, but the couple had settled back down. "What?"

Eleven touched her lips with her fingers.

"Kissing?" Nancy asked, puckering her lips. When Eleven nodded, she continued, "It's a kiss."

Eleven thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Mike kissed me."

"*Really*?" Nancy asked, suddenly curious. "How was it?"

A small smile came to Eleven's lips. "Nice."

"Aww," Nancy said, smiling. "I didn't know he had kissed you yet. Good for him."

Eleven blushed, then looked back at her food.

When she finished, Nancy took her back to the Wheeler home so El could try on the dress as well as get a crash course in dancing.

Saturday, the day of the dance, came quickly. Around four o'clock, Joyce dropped Eleven off at the Wheeler home, making Karen Wheeler promise to take plenty of pictures. Eleven would be spending the night there, as both Jonathan and Joyce would both be working late. Will was spending the night at Lucas', as he, Lucas, and Dustin weren't attending the dance.

Mike was happy to have El sleep over, even if she would be in the basement and he upstairs. He had offered her his room, but she had politely declined, eager to sleep in the fort again.

When Joyce and Eleven entered the home, Mike was taking a shower as he tried to wash off some last minute jitters, as well as trying to clean himself up.

When Mike emerged from the bathroom, he could hear girls' voices coming from Nancy's room. Walking to the nearly closed door, he peeked in. He saw his mom and sister surrounding El, whose back was to him. Eventually she turned, and her eyes met Mike's.

He blushed, at having been caught observing this intimate moment, and they both smiled. His mother followed Eleven's gaze, and she quickly walked to the door. Before she closed it, she told Mike to go get ready.

After getting some help from his dad with his bowtie, Mike waited patiently downstairs for Eleven. When he first heard movement on the stairs, he sat up in anticipation, but was disappointed when it was Nancy who came down, looking excited.

She grabbed the family camera and stood to the side. She saw Mike looking at her, and smiled. "She's coming," she said quietly.

Moments later, he heard slower footsteps on the stairs and he stood up. When he finally caught sight of Eleven, it took all of his efforts for his jaw not to drop to the floor. She looked beautiful in the pink dress. Mike was speechless.

"Uh...wha...." he stammered.

She smiled. "Hi, Mike."

"Um...hi, El," he responded. "You look..."

"Pretty?"

"Beautiful."

"Thank you."

Although they were both ready to go, they posed for pictures. When his mother had finally taken enough, the two climbed into Nancy's car so she could drop them off at the dance.

When they arrived at the school, Nancy reminded them that she'd be

there to pick them up at nine, when it ended. The two kids nervously emerged from the car.

Taking Eleven's hand in his, Mike led her into the school building. The two were greeted at the door by a teacher where Mike purchased tickets. He then led her down the hall and to the doors of the gym. Pausing, he turned to her. "Are you ready?"

When she nodded, he opened the door.

Eleven let out a gasp as they walked into the room. Loud music blared from speakers, and the dim lights added somewhat of an intimate look to the room. The walls were decorated with paper snowflakes as well as white balloons.

Mike saw how entranced she was, and paused. Leaning in close to her, he asked, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, and followed as he led her further into the gymnasium. They walked past a spot where groups of students were hopping around-dancing, she remembered-and to an area where tables were set up. Mike found a corner table that was empty, and he pulled out a chair for Eleven. Once she sat, he took the seat next to her.

She looked around the room, amazed by the the number of kids her age that were spread about. She saw a flash of light from a corner. Tapping Mike, she asked what it was.

"They're taking pictures," he explained. "We can get one, if you like."

The next song came on, a loud song with a fast beat. Turning to Eleven, Mike asked her if she wanted to go dance.

Shaking her head, she said she wasn't ready yet.

The two of them stayed at the table for a while, Eleven asking questions about what she was seeing in the gymnasium, and Mike happily answering them.

After a few songs had played, a slower one began pumping from the speakers. Mike watched as the dance floor thinned, and was surprised when he turned to El, who had an eager look on her face. "Dance?"

she asked.

His heart thumping in his chest, Mike nodded as he stood. Taking her hand, he led her to the dancefloor.

You can do this...you can do this...don't step on her feet... he told himself as he turned to face her. She put her hands on his shoulders, while he put his at her waist.

"Dancing is easy," he began. "Well, I think it is, anyway. You just..." He stopped when he noticed she was already moving, slowly swaying side to side. "You know how to dance?" he asked her.

She nodded, happy that she was doing it right. "Nancy showed me."

He smiled, as the two slowly moved on the dancefloor.

"You look really pretty," he told her after a few moments.

"Thanks," she said, blushing. "You do, too."

He shook his head. "Boys aren't pretty, El. They're...I don't know, handsome."

"Oh." Smiling, she said, "You're handsome."

He blushed, as well. The song ended, and Mike turned to go back to the table. The next song started to play, and Eleven pulled on his hand. Turning back to her, he saw she had another smile on her face. "Dance?" she asked again.

He smiled and put his hands back at her sides. He noticed her somewhat mouthing the words. "Do you like this song?" he asked.

Nodding, she said, "Nancy showed me how to dance to this song."

Mike grinned; the song was "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Foreigner.

It ended a few minutes later, and, after she reassured Mike she'd be okay, Mike went off to use the bathroom.

She sat by herself at the table for a few minutes, until something caused her heart to start beating quickly: the lights began to flicker, and all she could think about was something bad was going to happen. She sprang from her seat and looked around the room in anticipation of something...the Demogorgon, the six-legged monster, or *something* .

The flickering stopped, and a loud voice said, "Sorry, everyone. Just a power shortage. Everything's fine."

The next song, another quickly-paced one, started to play, and kids started jumping and hollering.

Eleven, embarrassed at herself, calmed down. Standing up, she walked out of the room.

When Mike emerged from the restroom, he didn't see Eleven anywhere. He wandered into the hallway and saw a door leading outside left open.

He found her outside, hugging herself in the frigid air as she sat on a step.

"El?" he asked as he approached. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head.

He took off his suit jacket, and put it on her shoulders. Instinctively, she put her arms into the sleeves. "Demogorgon," she muttered.

"What?"

Sighing, she said, "I thought it was here. The lights...blinked."

"Oh. I saw it too, El. But it's the snow. Sometimes when it's cold outside, electricity acts weird. But the Demogorgon...it's dead, though, El. You killed it."

She sniffled, and nodded her head. "I'm sorry."

"What're you sorry for?" he asked, sitting next to her.

"I left," she said, looking at him with tears in her eyes. "I didn't keep the promise."

"El, no," he said, pulling her closer. Her head now sat on his shoulder. "You saved us. We wouldn't even be here right now if it weren't for you. And besides, you're here now, right?"

She nodded, her head going up and down on his shoulder.

"You're safe now," he reminded her. "And I'm not going to let anyone hurt you again."

The two stayed next to each other outside until Eleven began hearing Mike's teeth chattering, and they went in. They didn't dance anymore, but Eleven was able to smile again as Mike told her some jokes he knew. When the dance was nearly over, they got their picture taken, and got two copies of the pic.

Nancy arrived soon after that, and the two rushed to the car, Eleven still hugging Mike's jacket around her arms.

When they got home, Mike walked her to the basement.

"Did you like it?" Mike asked, as the two descended the basement stairs.

Eleven nodded her head. "I'm sorry I...got sad."

Mike shook his head. "No, El, don't worry about it. I had a good time."

She nodded her head in agreement, smiling.

When they reached the bottom, he sighed. "Well...thanks for coming, El. I'll, uh...I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

“Okay,” she said.

He gave her a smile and turned to leave. When his foot was on the second step, he heard her quiet voice. “Mike?”

Turning back around, he asked “Yeah?”

She walked towards him; he met her halfway, going back down the stairs. She took off his jacket, and held it out for him.

“Oh. Thanks,” he said, taking it.

Then something happened that he didn’t see coming.

She kissed him.

After giving him the jacket, she took quick steps towards him. Mike didn’t process what was happening until he felt her lips on his as she pulled herself closer to him.

It lasted just a little longer than their first, and took Mike completely by surprise.

The two pulled apart. This time Eleven was the one looking at Mike with a face of uncertainty, wanting to know if she did it right.

The smile on his face told her everything she needed to know. She returned the smile.

“Um...thanks, El,” he muttered.

This time she blushed. “Goodnight, Mike.”

“Night, El.”

He climbed back up the stairs while Eleven turned around, happiness oozing through her veins. She saw, on the floor next to the fort, a pair of pajamas for her to change into. Still with a smile on her face, she took them and went into the bathroom to change.

8. Bad Things

The morning after the Snow Ball, Mike woke up with a smile on his face as he relived the night before. *Had El really kissed him?* He was still having a hard time believing it. Her kissing him had given him a newfound courage, and he decided that he was going to ask her to be his girlfriend.

She wouldn't understand, not at first, and he'd explain it to her. And he knew his friends were sure to tease him about it, but he didn't care. He cared so deeply for her, he wasn't worried about their good-natured taunts.

Climbing out of his bed, he tossed on some clothes and went downstairs to the kitchen. His mom was at the table feeding Holly.

"You want me to fix you something?" she asked Mike.

Shaking his head, he answered "No, I'm going to take some food down and eat with El."

His mother nodded and smiled as she went back to feeding Holly.

Mike put some breakfast on a tray and carried it down into the basement. Eleven was already awake, sitting up in the fort and flipping through a book. Their eyes met when he got to the bottom step, causing both of them to blush.

"Brought you breakfast," he told her, holding up the tray.

She smiled, and made room for him to sit. Sitting on his knees, he put the tray between the two of them as he scooted into the fort. He saw, near the pillow where she would've lay her head last night, the photo of the two of them from the dance. It was propped up against one of the sides of the fort.

"You sleep okay?" he asked.

Nodding her head, she picked up an Eggo waffle. The two ate quietly for a few minutes.

"The guys are going to come over this afternoon," Mike said, crumbs tumbling down his shirt. "We have a campaign."

She nodded her head.

"You can watch, if you want, or play with Holly if you want. We.."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"What does it mean if you....'like'...someone?"

Mike could feel his face flush. "Um....why do you ask?"

She swallowed the food in her mouth. "You said Snow Ball is with someone you like."

Mike nodded his head, racking his brain for an explanation. "Um...well...ok. You like people like your friends and family. I like Dustin, Lucas, and Will because they're my friends."

Eleven nodded in understanding.

"But there's another kind of like. Um...this kind of like is when you want to...hold hands, and go to dances like the snowball, and..."

"And this?" she asked, leaning over and placing a quick, soft, kiss on his lips.

"Uh...yeah, and that," Mike said as she leaned back with a blush on her face. "That's...kissing. You do it with someone you really like. And I..." he paused, mustering up his courage. "I really like you, El."

She smiled shyly back at him. "I really like you, too."

Finishing his waffle, he brushed his hands off on his pants. "Um...El, can I talk to you about something?"

Picking up her second waffle, she nodded her head.

"Um...I was wondering if you wanted to, uh...be my girlfriend?"

She tilted her head. "What is that?"

"It's, uh, when a boy and girl really like each other, and they want to, uh, date. You know, like I was saying before, holding hands, and kissing and stuff."

She thought about what he said as she chewed her Eggo. "You and me?"

He nodded his head. "If that's, uh...okay with you."

She smiled, nodding her head again. "Yes."

Feeling a surge of bravery, Mike leaned over the breakfast tray and kissed his new girlfriend.

When they had both finished eating, Mike took the tray upstairs to wash. Eleven changed clothes while he did so, borrowing one of Mike's old Star Wars shirts and some sweatpants. Although she wanted to stay and spend the day with Mike, she also wanted clothes of her own to change into. So she decided to go home before the campaign.

Nancy and Karen offered to drive her. But Jonathan was going to be picking Will up from Lucas' pretty soon, so they thought they'd walk over to the Sinclair's and surprise their friends.

It was a surprisingly warm December day as the two set off down Maple Street, side by side, talking about the dance last night and seeing their friends.

"Can I tell them?" El asked.

"Tell them what?" Mike asked.

"That I'm your...girlfriend," she said, unable to hide a blush.

Mike did the same. "Um...we can, I guess." Although his mind was

already racing with things the boys would say.

When they arrived at Lucas' house, Mike knocked on the door. Mrs. Sinclair answered, and told them that their friends had gone down to Dustin's to play video games. So Mike and El kept walking down the street to the Henderson's, just a few more houses down.

They got to a crossing and paused as they waited for a car to turn. After it did, and they were about to cross the street, a van pulled up near them, screeching as it braked to a stop.

"Whoa," Mike said, taking El's hand and stopping her from crossing. As he did, he glanced at the van and saw something familiar written on the side that made his heart stop:

Hawkins Power and Light.

Before he had time to prepare, the van doors swung open and men were out, grabbing El.

She let out a scream as someone picked her up, sticking a needle into her neck and immediately making her go limp.

"No!" Mike yelled, going for the one who had Eleven. Another man grabbed the back of Mike's coat jacket, and tossed him to the ground as they got back into the van. As Mike struggled to stand, shoes slipping on the melting snow, the van peeled away. The whole ordeal had taken about twenty seconds.

"El!" Mike called, sprinting as fast as he could after the van. But try as he may, he couldn't keep up, and it disappeared around a corner.

He immediately ran to the Henderson home, and knocked and knocked until the door was opened by Dustin himself.

"Jesus, Mike, what're you doing?" Dustin asked, seeing Mike's face red, wet with tears and his breathing labored.

"They...they took...Eleven..." Mike breathed, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

“What?” Dustin asked, as Lucas and Will came to the door.

“The...bad men,” Mike said, standing to his full height. “They just...took her.”

Will turned white as a ghost. “When?”

“Just now,” Mike said, getting his strength back. “We’ve gotta do something.”

As if on cue, Jonathan’s car pulled into the Henderson driveway. Jonathan, seeing the worried looks on the boys’ faces, rushed from the car and asked what was wrong.

Minutes later, they were all crammed into Jonathan’s car as they sped to the Byers home. The boys were visibly shaken, none so more than Mike and Will. Upon arriving home, the boys rushed into the house and woke Joyce, who was still sleeping from her long night at work.

“Why are you being so loud,” she asked as they roused her awake from where she lay on the couch. Seeing the fresh tears on Jonathan and Will’s faces, she immediately sat up.

“It’s El, isn’t it?” she asked, feeling her own tears begin to build.

In another part of Hawkins, Eleven slowly regained consciousness. As her eyes opened, she muttered, “Mike?”

Upon opening her eyes fully, however, she realized that Mike wasn’t here. Instead, she was in a closed space, and the ground seemed to be moving beneath her.

“Ah, crap, she’s awake,” she heard someone say.

It was then that she saw the two men watching her, and the last thing that had happened before she’d been knocked out painfully came back. *The bad men* .

She was laying on her back, with one man facing her and another to

her right. She sat up quickly, but that caused her head to spin.

“Just settle down,” the man across from her told her.

Instead, she glared at him, concentrating with all her might. Instead of blood leaking from the man’s eyes, or his head snapping, he smiled at her. Pointing to his head, he said “Trying to get me, huh? Not going to happen, kid.”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant; when she did, she lunged at him, growling with fury.

The man to her side caught her before she got up, and slammed her back down, the wind being knocked from her.

“Calm down, kid,” the man said, pointing his weapon at her. “Just lie there and be still. We’ll be back at the lab in no time.”

The lab . She tried once more to jump up, but the man sighed, and shot her in her neck again. Feeling dizzy, her head dropped to the floor of the van, and she passed out.

“Whoa, Joyce, hold on,” Hopper said as he paced his small office. He was on the phone with Joyce Byers and was hoping he hadn’t heard her right.

“She’s *gone* ,” Joyce said over the phone. “The...the Hawkins Lab people, Hop. They took her again.”

“Okay, start over, tell me what happened,” he said, putting a hand to his face.

So she told him how Eleven and Mike had been walking down the street, only to be ambushed by a Hawkins Power and Light van that had shoved Mike out of the way and snatched up Eleven.

“Dammit,” he muttered under his breath. Then he thought to himself...Why would they do this? He had the recording...

The recording. Crap.

“Joyce,” he said, grabbing his keys, “I’ll be over in a little bit, okay? Just..stay there.”

Slamming the phone down, he jogged out of his office and out to his jeep.

On the drive to his trailer, he kept mentally berating himself. The recording that he’d made, of the government men, had always been on his person since he’d made it. But this morning, *of all days*, he’d left it at home.

As he arrived at his home, skidding to a halt, he already knew it was too late. His front door was open, and he could see footprints around the entrance.

Unholstering his gun as he climbed out of the jeep, he cautiously made his way to his trailer. Once at the door, he gently pushed the door open, hearing it lightly tap the inside wall. He waited a moment; no response.

He went in, looking left, and then right. No movement. He scanned the rest of the rooms but found nothing. Once back in his front room, he put his gun away.

His place was a mess, similar to how it’d looked when he’d gone searching for the wire they’d put in his home. He went back to the bedroom and searched the pants he had worn yesterday; sure enough, the recording was gone.

He swore to himself as he picked up his hat and went back outside.

Back at the Byers, the group was impatiently waiting for Hopper to arrive. Joyce paced the kitchen, smoking and silently crying. Jonathan was in his room, doing God knows what. Will sat at the table, looking through some of the pictures he had drawn with Eleven. Dustin sat on one end of the couch, looking at the floor. Lucas sat on the other end, his eyes on Mike, who was sitting in one of the armchairs. He, too, was looking at the floor. But unlike Dustin, Lucas could tell his mind was miles away.

Lucas was beginning to get worried. Mike had cried on the drive over, but since arriving at the Byers, he hadn't said a word. Lucas knew that Eleven being snatched had to be hurting Mike the most, yet his friend was keeping it all inside. "Mike?" he asked.

Mike just kept staring at the floor, that dead look on his face.

"Mike?" Lucas asked, a little louder.

As if waking from a trance, Mike's head jerked up, and he glanced at Lucas. "What?"

"Are you alright?"

He didn't answer; instead, his eyes went back to the spot on the floor.

Lucas began to say something else when they heard a car pull up outside. Joyce stubbed out her cigarette and rushed to the door as Hopper came in.

"Well?" she asked expectantly.

"I had Flo put out a BOLO on the van, but those things are everywhere, everyone's going to be calling in," Hopper said, shaking his head.

"Well, what can we do? We have to do something, Hop, we can't just let her..."

"Joyce, I know, I know," Hopper said, putting his hands on her shoulders. She choked back a sob, and pulled away, wiping her eyes.

Hopper turned to the boys in chairs. "Kid," he said to Mike. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Mike looked at him as if he hadn't seen him come in. "I already told Ms. Byers," he muttered.

"Yeah, I know, but there might be something you remember *now*, that you didn't say before."

Mike just shook his head. Standing up, he walked out of the room.

Hopper sighed. Looking at Joyce and the kids, he said, "We're going to find her, alright? Trust me. One way or another, we're going to bring her back."

As Hopper went to go talk to Joyce, Lucas stood up to go find Mike, with Dustin and Will behind him. The trio found him in El/s/Will's room, where he sat on the bed, silent tears falling down his face.

"Mike..." Lucas began, "She's going to come back."

"I asked her to be my girlfriend," Mike muttered.

"What?" Will asked.

"Eleven. I asked her to be my girlfriend. We were going to tell you guys when we got to Dustin's. But..." he trailed off. "It's my fault," he added, wiping at his eyes with his sleeve.

"What?" Dustin asked.

Mike sighed. "I promised her I'd protect her, and I couldn't."

"Mike, they had guns," Lucas said. "There wasn't anything you could do."

Mike shook his head. "I promised I'd protect her." Sitting up, a look flashed across his face. "We gotta go get her."

"How?" Dustin asked. "We don't know where they took her, and they've got guns."

"Mike," Lucas said, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Let's just see what Hop is going to do, okay?"

Sighing, Mike nodded his head.

The boys went back to the front room, where Hopper was in a heated conversation with Joyce.

"Joyce, you're not coming this time," he impatiently told her.

"Bullshit," she said back, just as impatient. "El is practically my

daughter, Hop. I'm going."

"Joyce..." he began.

"Just because it was you that gave her up doesn't mean this is yours to do alone," she told him. It was then that they noticed the kids had entered the room.

"You gave her up?" Mike asked.

Hopper sighed, turning away.

"Mom?" Will asked.

Joyce looked at the floor, then back at her son. "When you were...in that place," she began.

"Joyce..." Hopper interrupted.

Ignoring him, she continued. "The only way we could get you back, is if we told them where Eleven was," Joyce said, finishing. Her eyes were watering up again.

"How could you?" Mike asked.

"I told them," Hopper said. "She didn't have anything to do with it." His response was met with stares of hurt, confusion, and anger from the kids.

"It was the only way to get you back," Joyce said to Will.

Will blushed, feeling embarrassed that he was part of this. The other boys were shaking their heads in disbelief, not knowing how to feel.

Except Mike.

With a bitterness in his voice that he didn't know he possessed, he said "You never cared about her," to Hopper.

"That's not fair, kid," Hopper said.

"I'm going to go get her back," Mike said, grabbing his jacket and going for the door. Hopper blocked him, shaking his head.

“No. You’re going home. *All* of you,” he said, looking at the faces in the room. “Joyce is going to take you home, and *I* will deal with this. Got it?”

Will, Lucas, and Dustin shuffled their feet, not really giving a response. Mike, on the other hand, glared angrily up at Hopper.

Glaring back just as hard, Hopper said, “Do I make myself clear?”

Mike felt a hand on his shoulder as Joyce attempted to ease the tension. “Michael,” she said.

He huffed, and turned back around.

“I’ll be back,” Hopper said, glancing at Joyce. He ducked outside.

Joyce drove the boys home. When Mike entered his house, his mother greeted him with a hug; Mike had called her before he’d left the Byers’ home and told her the news.

“I’m so sorry, Mike,” she said, rubbing his back.

He nodded his head, and without saying anything, climbed the stairs up to his room. Sitting on his bed, he saw the photo taken last night of he and El at the dance. He could feel tears start to rise as he looked at their happy faces. He couldn’t help but wonder, *what if they hadn’t walked to Dustin’s? What if she had went home to the Byers last night instead of staying here?*

What hurt the most was knowing that he had broken his own promise of protecting her. Whether he could have done more or not didn’t matter; he had let her down.

Sitting back up, he grabbed his backpack and emptied its contents. He stuffed a shirt and his flashlight inside. It was still bright out; it was the middle of the afternoon, but he took it just in case.

Turning on his Supercom, he called Lucas.

“Lucas? Pick up. Over.”

Nothing at first, then “What, Mike? Over?”

“I’m going to go find El. Over.”

A sigh, then “Mike, what’re you talking about?...Over.”

“The bad men took her. She’s at the lab, I know it. And I’m going to go get her back. Call Dustin, call Will. I’m going with or without you guys. Meet me at Elm and Cherry in twenty minutes if you’re with me. If not, then...I’m going alone. Over and out.”

He switched off his walkie and shoved it into the backpack.

A few miles away, Eleven’s eyes slowly fluttered open as she regained consciousness once more. It was dark. *Upside Down* ?

Upon fully opening her eyes, though, she realized where she was-the room.

In fright, she scooted back until she was against the wall, and took deep breaths as she tried to calm herself down.

She was just getting calm when she heard the door open, and the bald man from months ago walked in, limping. He smiled at her.

“Welcome back, Jane. You’re home.”

She shook her head. “Not home.”

“Oh, yes it is. We have a lot of work to do together. Important work. And the sooner you realize that, the better things will go. And the sooner,” he said, looking around the cramped room, “You can get out of here.” Walking back towards the doorway, he said, “Until then, make yourself comfortable.” And with that, he left, closing the door behind him.

Eleven pulled her knees to her chest as she felt the first few tears drop from her eyes. She thought about all of the good times she’d had in the past two months; seeing her friends again, drawing with Will, getting to know Joyce, going to a mall with Nancy, trick or treating,

dancing with Mike and becoming his girlfriend.

Mike. Was he okay? What had happened to him? She hoped he wasn't hurt, that they hadn't hurt him in their attempt to get to her.

A sob escaped her throat as she then realized she may never see him again. Sliding to the floor, she didn't fight the tears as they fell.

At Elm & Cherry, Mike glanced at his watch. It was almost past the twenty minutes he'd given Lucas and the boys to meet him. Was he really going to do this alone?

Yes, he thought to himself. He wasn't sure how he'd get into Hawkins Lab, but he would find a way.

It had been an ordeal getting out of his house. Both his parents were in the kitchen, discussing what had happened. He had gone downstairs with the pretense of going to the basement to work on homework, then snuck out the basement door. Once he'd done that, he remembered his bike was in the front of the house, so he'd had to go back and get it, just as his dad had gone into the garage to get something. Mike had had to wait him out before grabbing his bike.

Once more, he looked at his watch. It'd been twenty one minutes. He was just about to turn away when he saw something that made him feel better; Lucas, Dustin, and Will riding their bikes towards him.

When the boys saw him, they pedaled faster, then they all skidded to a stop as they got in front of their friend.

"Thanks," Mike said.

Lucas shrugged. "It's not like we have a choice. Like you said, El's one of us now."

Mike nodded, but then admitted, "But I don't know how we're going to get into Hawkins Lab, guys."

"There's a pipe," Will said, remembering.

“What?”

“Eleven. She told me she got out through a pipe. There’s one that leads into the woods by Mirkwood, that’s how we can get in.”

“If we can find it,” Dustin said.

“Then we can get in,” Lucas finished.

“And we can get El,” Mike added.

The boys turned their bikes in the direction of Mirkwood, and biked away, determined to save their friend.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry...

Things will get better, things will get fluffier.

I originally had this as 9 chapters, but I don't think I can finish this in just one more chapter. The next chapter will hopefully be up within a week.

9. Once More Unto the Breach

The ride to Hawkins Lab took a little longer than expected, as the boy's bikes, which had been put away for the winter, slipped and slid on the occasional icy patch. When they finally arrived at the woods near Mirkwood, they stepped off their bikes and walked them towards the lab.

"Did she say *where* this pipe was?" Lucas asked Will.

Shaking his head, Will said "She just told me it was around here."

"Should we split up?" Dustin suggested.

"No," Mike said. "We stick together."

It took some time walking around the premises, but the boys eventually found a pipe that seemed to lead into the building. Tossing their bikes to the ground, the boys hesitantly walked closer.

Dustin knelt down. Peering into the pipe, he told his friends "It looks like it goes for a while. And it's really...narrow. We can only go one at a time, or one behind the other." He stood back up, and brushed off the light snow on his pants. Shaking his head, he said "I shoulda worn my snow pants."

"We *all* should've," Lucas said, looking at the slush.

"Come on, what's more important? A little snow, or saving El?" Mike asked, bending down to look into the pipe. Dustin was right, it seemed to go on forever into darkness. And it *was* narrow. He wasn't exactly claustrophobic, but the thought of getting stuck somewhere in there made him shiver.

Then he thought about Eleven, and her fear of confined spaces. *If she did it, so can I*, he told himself.

He took off his backpack and pulled out his flashlight. Shining it inside, he told his friends, "I'm going in."

And with that, he pushed his backpack in front of him and crawled

into the pipe.

He had crawled maybe three feet before he heard what sounded like another backpack slapping the the ground, and then he heard Lucas grumble “Damn, this thing is tight.” A few crawls later and he heard Dustin crawl in, and a moment later, Will.

“You see anything yet?” Dustin called up to Mike.

“No,” Mike responded.

“This reminds me of Star Wars,” Dustin said.

“Why?” Lucas asked.

“It’s like we’re going to rescue Princess Leia. El is Leia, Mike is Han...”

“How come he’s Han?” Lucas asked.

“Come on, really?” Dustin asked.

“Fine,” Lucas muttered.

“Will is Luke, cuz, you know, they’re like brother and sister, and you and me are C-3PO and R2D2.”

Will chuckled.

“C-3PO and R2?” Lucas asked, pausing for a moment. “What about Chewbacca?”

“Oh yeah, forgot about him,” Dustin said, crawling on. “Okay, I’m Chewie, then.”

“How come you’re Chewie?” Lucas complained. “Why not me?”

“Guys, will you shut up?” Mike said over his shoulder.

“Of course you’re fine, you’re Han,” Lucas muttered.

They crawled quietly for a few more minutes, Mike wondering if this pipe was ever going to end. His back was beginning to scrape the top

of the pipe, making him wonder if it got smaller as you got farther in. He and Lucas were the tallest of the group, and he no doubt knew that Lucas' back had to be sore like his was. Dustin, though not as tall as they were, was husky, and his size had to be a factor in these narrow confines. Will was still the smallest, almost as small as El. Speaking of which...Mike felt he needed to say something.

"Hey, guys? Thanks for coming."

"What're you talking about? Of course we'd come," Lucas said.

"Yeah, she may be your girlfriend, but she's our friend, too," Dustin said.

"I know, just...thanks."

"Will? You okay back there?" Mike asked. The small boy had been quiet for a while.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Will answered. "I just don't like it in here."

"I'm getting crap all over my hands," Dustin complained. "It feels like we've been crawling for hours."

"It's only been a few minutes," Lucas said.

"I know, but it's almost..."

"Guys, *shhh* !" Mike said, stopping. He heard a noise up ahead. His friends paused as well, and they all listened. They heard what sounded like the groaning of an animal.

"What is that?" Lucas asked.

"I don't hear anything," Will said.

"That's 'cause you're too far back," Lucas said. Turning his head in the cramped space, he asked Dustin if he could hear it.

"Barely," Dustin answered.

"What's it sound like?" Will asked.

“A monster, maybe,” Lucas said. Looking at Mike’s form in front of him, he quietly asked “Do you think it’s the Demo..”

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” Mike said. “And *no* , because that’s...dead. I’m going on.” Mike crawled a little more, and the groaning became more intense. Shining his light in front of him, he sighed a sigh of relief. He could see an opening in the tunnel. “Guys, we’re almost there,” he said, pushing his backpack forward and crawling on. About ten minutes later, Mike felt a gush of warm air as he got to the end. Pushing his backpack through the hole, he pulled himself through, and entered a dark grey room, with the groaning getting even louder.

As he waited for his friends to come through, he shone his flashlight beam around the room. It looked to be a science lab, or something that could have once passed as a science lab. White flakes were floating around the wrecked room and as he took in a breath of air, he started coughing.

He was opening his backpack and grabbing a t shirt to use as a bandana just as Lucas’ backpack fell to the floor as he, too, emerged from the pipe.

“What the...” Lucas said, as he began to cough.

“There’s something wrong with the air in here,” Mike said, pointing to his homemade bandana. Lucas nodded, and opened up his backpack to do the same.

A few minutes later Dustin and Will came out of the pipe, and they followed suit with Lucas and Mike, wrapping their mouths with t shirts.

“Oh, man, my clothes are all dirty,” Dustin complained.

“Guys, come on,” Mike said. “We have to find Eleven.”

“How do we even find her?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll figure out something,” Mike said, strapping on his backpack and walking further into the room. His friends were right on his tail.

As they moved a few more feet into the grey, something on their left caught their attention, and they froze.

“Is that....” Dustin began.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “I think it is.”

What they were looking at was the Gate to the Upside Down. It pulsed and moaned, filling the room with it’s sounds.

Mike stole a glance at Will, who looked as if he’d seen a ghost, no doubt remembering the terrors of his time in there. Mike immediately went over to him, grabbing his shoulders.

“Will? Will?” Mike said, as Will stared blankly at the Gate. His eyes seemed to regain focus, and he looked at Mike.

“You’re okay,” Mike told him. “You’re safe, okay?”

Will swallowed, and nervously nodded his head.

“Come on,” Mike said, turning back to Lucas and Dustin. “Let’s keep going.”

Topside, at the gates to Hawkins Lab, Jim Hopper was attempting to threaten and intimidate his way onto the facility. The MP Officer manning the gate, Patrick, wasn’t budging on his decision to deny Hopper access.

“Tell Dr. Berger I know about the girl, and if he doesn’t let me in in five minutes there’s gonna be hell to pay,” Hopper said.

“And I’m telling you,” Patrick explained, “Dr. Berger isn’t on the premises today.” And with that, Patrick closed the small window in his booth, effectively sealing Hopper out. Jim began to get out of the car, but the two guards with guns on the other side of the gate kept him inside his jeep.

Sighing, he backed out and turned around. Swearing under his breath, he decided that he’d have to come back at night, and maybe

try what he had done a year ago.

As he pulled back onto the main road, he glanced once more at the building, wondering if he'd be able to sneak in at night. He'd driven just a few seconds when he saw the bikes, and he skidded to a stop.

Damn kids .

Through the woods, he saw four bikes on the ground by a pipe that seemed to lead into the lab. Getting out of the car, he walked a few paces into the woods and to the pipe. Kneeling down, he shone his flashlight in. It was definitely too small for him to get into, but a group of kids could definitely fit in there.

Dammit .

Going back to his jeep, he reached in the back for his bolt cutters. Swearing once more under his breath, he marched back to the fence.

Inside the building, Eleven, who had fallen asleep curled against a wall, was startled awake by the door opening.

She opened her eyes, hoping that it'd all been a part of some bad dream; but when she lay eyes on the bald man from before, those hopes were dashed.

He wasn't alone; a man stood in the doorway, his hand next to the weapon on his hip.

"Are we going to have any trouble, Jane?" the bald man asked.

Sitting up, Eleven shook her head. "No."

"Good. Then come, let's go back to your room."

Eleven nodded, and stood up. On her way out, she tried really hard to concentrate on the door, but the effort was making her head spin. She grabbed onto the wall for support, steadying herself.

The bald man saw her and smiled. "It's still not going to work, Jane.

Now. Let's go."

She nodded and composed herself. But on her way out, she glanced once more at the door. And she thought she saw it move an inch.

A floor below, the boys had just left the big room with the Gate and were now heading down a long hallway.

"You think she's down here?" Dustin asked.

"I don't think so," Mike replied, shining his flashlight around in front of him.

"I don't think *anyone* is down here," Lucas added.

The boys passed a few dark rooms, and eventually got to a staircase and an elevator. Mike peeked inside, then nodded towards the stairs as the boys followed behind him.

"Why not take the elevator?" Dustin asked.

"They'll be expecting that," Lucas said.

"Besides, it looked broken," Mike said. "The buttons are all mashed in and there's circuits everywhere."

The group slowly walked up the stairs and got to the next floor. Waiting outside the door, they slid their handmade bandanas off their faces. Mike glanced at Will, who had some color return to his face. "You okay?" Mike softly asked him. Will nodded.

Lucas carefully turned the knob and looked into the hallway, immediately closing it.

"What?" Mike asked.

"There were people," Lucas said.

Mike sighed, and replaced Lucas by the door. He, too, cautiously opened the door, and saw the group of guards in the hall. He was

about to close the door when there was movement in the hallway. He saw a bald man walking towards a room, with someone walking behind him.

“Guys! It’s El!” Mike said.

The other boys crammed into the doorway, and saw her dutifully walking into the room behind the man.

Mike closed the door. “We’ve gotta find a way to get to her.”

“But how?” Will asked.

“Look,” Dustin said, pointing above their heads. In the wall there was a vent.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Oh, not again.”

Ignoring him, Mike got a boost from Dustin, and was able to pry open the vent. Pulling himself up and into it, he sighed when he got in.

“Well?” Lucas asked.

“We can fit in,” Mike said, whispering back. With difficulty, he turned around and pulled Dustin up. Will got a boost from Lucas, and then Lucas pulled himself up.

The vents were more wider than the pipe had been, but they had to go slowly; every noise they made seemed to echo in the cramped space, and they worried the guards would be able to hear them.

Once Mike got his bearings, he crawled as carefully as he could towards the room he’d seen Eleven go to. It wasn’t easy; their pacing was much slower, and the heat running through the vent was making them sweat.

But eventually Mike stuck his hand out, signaling they’d arrived. From where he was, he could see Eleven sitting on a bed, a man standing at the door as he talked to her.

“You’re going to see, Jane,” he said, “That everything we are doing is for the best. Okay?”

Mike watched Eleven nod her head.

“Good. Now I’ll be back in a few moments, okay?” The man then turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Mike watched El sit on the hospital-looking bed, and curl into a ball. He then proceeded to push the vent opening, until it gave way, flying to the floor. Eleven, startled, jumped up in surprise as she looked up. When she saw Mike’s face, she smiled.

Mike pulled himself through the opening, and ungracefully fell to the floor.

Upon standing, he and El grabbed onto each other, hugging tightly. The boys watched as Mike whispered something to her, which caused her to look up at him with a curious expression on her face. He then whispered something else, and the two reluctantly let go of each other.

Eleven pointed at the mounted camera in the small room. “Watching,” she whispered.

Mike nodded, and then turned back to the vents. “We’re going to have to go through there,” he said to her.

But Eleven shook her head. “Too small.”

Mike looked desperate. “I know you don’t like small spaces, but it’s the only way to get out! And besides, we...”

Dustin, whose head had been poking through the vent opening, dropped to the floor. “Will said the guards aren’t there,” he said. A moment later, Will dropped to the ground, followed by Lucas.

“Guys, *look* ,” Mike said, pointing to the camera.

“Shit,” Lucas said.

Holding Eleven’s hand, Mike tried the door, but it wouldn’t open. Turning back to his friends, he said, “Do you think...”

Then there was a *pop* , and the door opened. Mike looked to Eleven

and saw a small trickle of blood drip from her nose.

Gripping her hand tighter, he opened the door and looked out into the hallway. Sure enough, it was empty, and the group quickly walked back towards the basement.

They had just reached the door leading to the stairs when a voice behind them warned, "Hold it right there."

Turning, they saw the bald scientist as well as two security guards.

"Leave the girl, and then leave the premises," he told the boys.

"No," Mike said, moving between the scientist and El. "You'll have to kill me first."

"Son, you don't understand what you're doing," the man calmly said.

Lucas then moved in front of Mike, Dustin in front of him, and finally Will in front of them all.

"Go to hell," Will told the scientist.

The scientist sighed. "Okay, then. I..."

There was a sudden *whack*, and one of the security guards fell down to the ground. Everyone turned, and saw as Hopper swiftly moved to the other guard and knocked him out, too. Pointing his gun at the scientist, he said, "Hello there, Dr. Berger. Long time no see."

The man, Dr. Berger, sneered at Hopper. "You're not going to hurt me, Chief. You..."

He stopped talking when he was suddenly whisked off his feet by an unknown force, falling through the door leading to the stairway. He lay, bewildered, on his back as he got his bearings.

Hopper and the boys turned to El, who was bleeding from her nose and ears.

"El..." Mike said.

Ignoring him, she concentrated on Dr. Berger again. Despite the pain radiating through her body, she sent him flying down the flight of stairs to the Gate floor. Still dazed, he looked up at her as she backed into the hallway with the boys. With one last effort, she broke off the door handle, effectively trapping him inside. Exhausted, she began to fall, just as Lucas and Mike caught her.

“Let’s go,” Hopper said, taking Eleven from them.

The group found a way out of the lab, going through a side door that Hopper had used to enter. Hopper put Eleven into the back of his truck, with the boys throwing their bikes in the back and then scurrying inside the jeep.

Mike sat next to Eleven, with Dustin and Lucas also cramming into the backseat. Will sat up front.

“I thought I told you boys,” Hopper said, as he backed out onto the street, “To stay at home.”

“She’s our friend,” Dustin said.

“We weren’t going to just leave her,” Mike said.

Hopper shook his head, as he started driving towards Joyce’s home.

Eleven’s eyes opened for a moment. She saw her friends, smiled, then lay her head on Mike’s shoulder as she slipped back into sleep.

Sitting in the back of the truck, Eleven’s head on his shoulder, Mike thought back to when they’d seen each other in the lab and embraced. He had whispered into her ear, something he now couldn’t believe he’d said to her:

I love you.

She’d looked at him, not understanding, and he’d whispered that he’d tell her more later.

He felt a smile come to his lips as the jeep pulled out of Hawkins Lab.
He had his El back.

10. Home Sweet Home

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I don't know anything about Dungeons and Dragons, so if I butchered the game, I apologize.

The next few days meant different things to different people.

For Eleven, it meant returning to her new home, sleeping peacefully in what was now considered her bed, and embracing the warmth of her friends and new family, whom she thought she may never see again.

For Mike, it meant returning home and suffering the rage of his parents, who were beyond upset that he'd snuck out once again. This time his mother didn't cut him any slack, forbidding him from going anywhere but home and school until the weekend. He was able to talk her into letting him use the Supercom to chat with El (but only 5 minutes a day) so he could check to make sure she was okay.

For Lucas, Will, and Dustin, it meant similar reactions from their parents and similar groundings, though the boys couldn't get too upset; they'd gone on a real life adventure and had emerged victorious.

For Hopper, it meant talking to the right people, and getting the process started of shutting down Hawkins Lab. He also spent the rest of the week working on getting papers for Joyce to officially adopt Eleven as her own, even if he had to fudge a few things to do so. Finally, he chipped in to help Joyce get a new bed for Will. The boy had been alternating between sharing Jonathan's to using a sleeping bag. With some effort, they were able to fit both beds into one room.

Things were looking up.

On Tuesday night, when Joyce came to tuck in El, Eleven asked her a question that had been gnawing at her since she'd returned on

Sunday.

“Momma?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“What is love?”

Joyce was surprised, but not totally taken aback. She hadn't expected Eleven to ask this question, but El was a curious girl, and with the things she was learning, some things were bound to trip her up. Sighing, she explained “Well...it's when you really, really care about someone. It's almost like they're a part of you, and you'd have a hard time going on without them.” She furrowed her brow. “Am I making any sense?”

Eleven nodded in understanding. “Who do you love?”

“Well,” Joyce said, taking a second, “Will and Jonathan. My mom and dad.”

Then, curious, Eleven asked, “Do you love me?”

“Of course I do, El.”

Eleven smiled. “I love you, too.”

Joyce hugged her, and kissed the top of her head. Watching as Eleven got under the covers, she asked, “Where'd you hear that word, love?”

Not wanting to rat out Mike, Eleven shrugged her shoulders, and said “I read about it.”

Joyce smirked, not really believing her. “You *read* about it. I see.” Walking to the doorway, she told her “Goodnight, sweetie.”

“Goodnight.”

Joyce turned off the light on her way out, leaving Eleven to think about that word as she drifted off to sleep. *Love*. She said it quietly to herself in the dark, and thought about the young boy who meant everything to her, a few miles away.

On Friday night, Mike had a hard time sleeping. Part of it was the excitement in knowing that, when he awoke in the morning, his grounding would be lifted. However, the other part, the part that was *really* keeping him up, was what he had said to Eleven on Sunday when they'd found her:

I love you .

It'd just stumbled out of his mouth as he'd hugged her, and once it was said, it couldn't be taken back.

Not that he really wanted to take it back; he meant it. Since her return, he had thought a lot about it. Even before he had considered asking her to be his girlfriend, even before she had kissed him, even before the Snow Ball, he knew he was in love with her. And yes, he knew that most would say he was too young to know what love really was, that it was something that grew over time.

But the sadness, the *emptiness* he had felt while she was gone, told him everything he needed to know: that he was in love with Eleven.

He had promised, when she'd looked confused, that he'd explain it to her. And now that he was actually going to see her tomorrow, he wasn't sure if he could.

Eleven had brought it up once during their nightly 5 minute Supercom talks; Monday, to be exact. But Mike had said he'd rather talk about it in person, on Saturday.

Now the thought of explaining to the girl he loved what love actually *was* terrified him. How would she react? Would she think he was a pathetic mouth breather?

He didn't think she would, but it may have been too much, too soon, he thought. Besides, at his age, people weren't supposed to be in love. They were supposed to go to make out parties and write little notes to each other and hold hands at the movies; not tell each other they're in love. But here he was, hours away from seeing her, and his heart was beating like he had just run a marathon.

On the ride over to the Byers the next day, he kept bouncing his leg out of nervousness. His mom looked back at him in the mirror, frowning. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, stopping his leg.

"Excited to see El, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that," he said, looking out the window.

When they arrived, his mother came inside with him to talk to Joyce. Will was on the couch, drawing.

"Where's El?" he asked Will.

"She's in her room," Will answered. "She's waiting for you."

Mike nodded, and went down the hallway.

He walked into her room. The windows were open and the semi-bright December sunshine brightened up the room. Eleven was sitting on her bed, cross legged, looking at a book. Hearing his footsteps, she looked up at the doorway; they smiled upon seeing each other.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said.

Moving quickly, he walked to the bed and the two hugged each other. He tilted his head and kissed her cheek; when she turned her face, they kissed, briefly but passionately, on the lips.

They pulled apart, with Eleven nestling her head on his chest.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

"Better," she said softly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come and see you."

"It's okay."

They were silent for a few moments, the only sound in the room was the bed creaking under their weight, and Karen and Joyce chatting down the hall.

“El...” Mike began.

“Yes?”

He sighed. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry about what happened.”

Pulling her head from his chest, she looked up at him. “What?”

“I...I said I was going to protect you, El, and I didn’t. I let the bad men take you.” He felt tears stinging the corner of his eyes, and he willed them away. “It’s my fault they took you away.”

“No.”

He looked at her. “No?”

Shaking her head, she repeated, “No. Not your fault, Mike. And you did protect me. You saved me.” Laying her head back on his chest, she added, “Thank you.”

He nodded, accepting it. “You’re welcome.”

They sat there quietly for a few minutes, until Mike decided to talk about the elephant in the room. “Um....about what I said in the lab...”

She sat up, nodding her head. “Joyce told me.”

“She did?”

El smiled. “I love you, too.”

Mike smiled, not feeling like such a mouth breather anymore.

“I love Will, and Jonathan, and Momma, too,” she continued.

“Oh,” Mike said.

But the way he said it, Eleven felt she had done something wrong.

Raising her eyebrows, she asked “Mike?”

He paused, debating whether or not to say anything. The way she was looking at him, she looked as if she thought he was mad at her. And he wasn't, he was just...disappointed. He wanted to explain what *kind* of love he felt for her, but he didn't know if (1) he could explain it right, and (2) if she would understand.

“Mike?” she asked again.

“It's, uh,” he mumbled. Then, sighing, he continued. “There's different kinds of love, El.”

“Different kinds?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his head. “There's, um, the love you have for your friends and family. Like, I love Nancy, Holly, and my parents, and Will, Dustin, and Lucas..”

She nodded, understanding.

“But, uh...” he paused, feeling his cheeks to start to flush, “Then there's being *in* love with someone.”

She looked confused. “What's that?”

“It's like normal love, I guess. But *more* . When you're in love with somebody, it means that one person means more to you than pretty much anyone else. You almost feel lost without them, and they're, uh....like your favorite person.” Taking a deep breath, he continued. “And being in love turns into romance.”

“Romance?”

“Yeah, you know, like...kissing and other stuff.”

She looked confused. “Other stuff?”

“Yeah, uh...I'll tell you later someday. But, uh...that's what in love means. And El, I...I'm in love with you.”

Her eyes widened as she felt herself blush.

When she didn't respond at first, Mike felt his heart drop. Of course he'd been hoping she would say it back, but he kind of knew that she wouldn't. He knew that this whole idea of boyfriend/girlfriend/love/romance was new to her, and he sometimes worried he was pushing her too far into uncharted territory.

But then she smiled at him, and said in her soft voice, "Me, too."

"What?"

Still smiling, she quietly said, "I think I'm in love with you, too."

He smiled, and leaned in to kiss her.

They were still kissing when Will walked in. Covering his eyes, he said "Aw, guys. Come on."

The two lovebirds pulled away from each other, giggling and blushing.

On the following Monday, Joyce decided to talk to Eleven about something that she'd been thinking about since the girl had began to stay with them. It was something she knew had to be brought up, despite her heart telling her not to.

When she came home for her daily lunch with El, they talked about their usual stuff: the boys, the upcoming holidays, and some new words Eleven had stumbled upon. But when Eleven was getting close to finishing her tuna salad, Joyce said she wanted to talk to her about something important.

Sighing, Joyce turned her chair so the two were facing each other. "Sweetie, you know I love you so much, don't you?"

Eleven nodded her head, wondering where this was going.

Taking a deep breath, Joyce continued with "You have a mother out there, El. A mother who misses you very much."

Eleven looked confused. "I thought you were my Momma."

Joyce smiled, feeling herself tear up some. “I *am* , sweetie. Or at least I want to be. We’re still working on it. But I didn’t give birth to you, and the woman who did...well, she’s your real mother. “I want her to know you’re okay,” Joyce said. “And if...if you decide that you want to live with her, then you can. But I’m hoping you’ll want to stay here with us.”

Eleven still looked confused, so Joyce told her about Terry Ives, about how Eleven’s real name was Jane Ives, and how Dr. Brenner had taken her from her mother as a baby.

By the end of the explanation, Eleven, though not as confused, had a lot of questions that Joyce tried her best to answer. She was happy that Eleven wasn’t mad; it had crossed her mind that she would be, after discovering that this information had been withheld from her. But she wasn’t.

Instead, after Joyce answered El’s questions to the best of her knowledge, she agreed to meeting her birth mother the following day.

“Can Mike come?” Eleven asked.

Joyce smiled. “If that will make you feel more comfortable, then yes.”

That evening after school Mike came over, and he and Eleven sat on the couch in front of the television; Mike working on homework while El watched some cartoon. Mike had known right away when he’d arrived that something was wrong, as El was quieter than usual.

“What’s wrong, El?” he asked.

She fidgeted with her fingers. “I have a mom.”

“Ms. Byers, I know.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Another mom. Momma is going to take me to see her tomorrow. Her name is...” she paused, trying to remember, “Terry.”

“Oh,” Mike said, closing his notebook. “How are you...doing?”

Eleven didn't know the word to say how she felt. She was happy, but scared. She wanted to meet this woman, but she didn't want to leave Joyce, Will, Jonathan, and the life she had begun here. And what if this Terry woman didn't like her?

“Scared,” she said, answering Mike's question.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I want to meet her, but...what if she doesn't like me? What if she wants to take me away?”

Mike sighed, contemplating his response. On one hand, he wanted Eleven to stay here with him. But she deserved to meet her real mother.

Taking her hand, he said, “She's going to like you, El. Everyone who knows you likes you. And if...if she wants you to live with her, then, well...”

She frowned, not liking his hesitation.

“We'll deal with it if we have to. But hopefully you get to stay here.”

The next day after school Joyce, Eleven, and Mike took the drive out to the Ives home. Joyce attempted to make chit-chat with the two teens, in an effort to ease the nervousness in the car. However, by the time they arrived at their destination, all three of them were worried. Joyce and Mike worried that this would be the last time they saw Eleven. Eleven worried she would be taken from her new family, but also curious about where she'd come from.

Joyce parked in front of the small house, and the three climbed out of the car and made their way to the house. After knocking, Joyce turned to El and gave her a smile. Mike, standing a little behind Eleven, took her hand in his.

The door opened half-way, and Becky Ives looked curiously at the

trio on the doorstep.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yes, I don’t know if you remember me,” Joyce said, “I came here over a year ago, to talk to your sister about my son, Will.”

Becky raised her eyebrows in recognition. “Oh, yeah. You came with that big guy, the police chief.” Opening the door all the way, she said “Come in.”

The three entered the house, Eleven’s eyes taking in all she could see.

“Is this your son?” Becky asked, glancing at Mike.

“No,” Joyce said, shrugging off her coat. “This is a friend of my son’s, Mike. My son’s fine now, he’s back home.”

Mike waved.

“What’re you doing out here?” Becky asked, taking Joyce’s coat.

“Well, um,” Joyce began, looking at Eleven, “This is Jane.”

Becky let out a snort. “You’re kidding, right?”

“N-no,” Joyce said. “I swear to you, I’m not.”

Eleven looked up at her aunt, who looked as if she’d seen a ghost.

“Hi,” Eleven said, waving shyly.

“Hi,” Becky said.

After more introductions and explanations, Becky led the three of them into the next room, where Terry Ives sat, sitting in the same place Joyce remembered from over a year ago.

“Terry,” Becky said as she got to the room. Terry’s eyes didn’t leave the TV. “I’d, uh, like to introduce you to someone.” Ushering Eleven in front of her, she said, “This is Jane, Terry.”

Terry's glance finally left the television, and she looked at the small girl who had entered the room.

Eleven nervously walked over, and sat on the couch that sat next to Terry's chair. "H-hi," Eleven said. She looked over this woman, this woman who had given her life, only to have her snatched away. She could see they shared similar features; they both had brown hair, similar noses. And although both of their eyes were brown, in Terry's brown eyes Eleven only saw sadness and emptiness.

Terry looked her over, and then said something unintelligible.

Eleven looked over at Joyce and Mike in confusion.

"Jane," Terry said, quietly but a little louder than last. A tear slipped down her cheeks as a smile inched its way across her face.

Eleven nodded her head. "Hi."

Joyce and Becky left the two to get acquainted, with Mike joining Eleven on the couch.

Sitting in the kitchen smoking, Joyce told Eleven's aunt about what had happened over the past two months.

"Sounds like you guys have had a helluva time," Becky said.

Joyce nodded. "And I...I wanted you to know that I'd like to adopt her. Eleven. Sorry," she said, shaking her head and smiling. "Jane. But I know she isn't my biological daughter, so..."

Becky chuckled. "You've seen my sister, right? She's not exactly in the right frame of mind to raise a child." Shaking her head, she added "And honestly, I don't know if I am, either."

"So what're you saying? Are you.."

"We're not going to fight you," Becky said, tears in her eyes. "Hell, you've been more of a family to her than we have, and I don't want to take her away from that."

“But what about your sister?”

“I’ll talk to Terry,” Becky said, stubbing out her cigarette. “But I think she’ll agree. But, I am going to ask you for two things.”

“Anything, of course,” Joyce said.

“We want to be able to visit her.”

“Anytime,” Joyce said, smiling through her own tears.

“And is it possible you could...keep the name Jane as her middle name?”

Joyce nodded, and took Becky’s hand. “Thank you.”

“What was she like?” Lucas asked the next day, when he and Dustin came over to visit.

“She was nice, I guess,” Eleven said. “Quiet.”

“I can’t believe you have a mom,” Dustin said.

“Of course she does, where do you think she came from?” Lucas said.

Mike and Will, sitting in the kitchen finishing their homework, shook their heads.

“You know what I mean,” Dustin said. Then, turning to El, said, “I’m glad you’re going to stay here.”

“Me too,” she said, smiling.

And a few days later, it became official. With Hopper’s help, Elle Jane Byers was formally adopted by Joyce Byers. They had to explain to El why the papers didn’t say “Eleven.”

“We’ll still call you that,” Will explained. “But people will wonder why the papers say ‘Eleven.’ It’s, you know, not usually a name.”

She’d nodded her head, preferring ‘El’ to ‘Eleven,’ anyway.

Winter break finally came, and the first Saturday of it the group had a D & D campaign in Mike's basement. This was the first one they'd had in awhile, and the boys were all excited for it. El, who only knew the few things Will or Mike had told her about the game, sat between Mike and Dustin. She and Mike held hands under the table as he led the game. Although she was clueless on how the game was played, she enjoyed listening to Mike's voice as he narrated the campaign, as well as the boy's reactions to things they ran across.

About twenty minutes in, things began to get a little interesting.

"You walk into a cave," Mike said, stealing a glance at El, who was finishing her third slice of pizza next to him. "It's dark. And...did you hear that?" Mike made a show of looking around him.

"What is it?" Will asked, leaning forward.

"*Chh, chh*," Mike said. "As you walk deeper into the cave, rattling chains echo around you."

"Oh, shit," Dustin said.

"Not a frost giant, not a frost giant," Lucas muttered under his breath.

"Suddenly, you turn and see...." with his free hand, Mike slammed a piece onto the board. "A princess! Eleanor the Elegant!"

The boys broke out into grins, and looked at Eleven, who had just put the crust in her mouth. Chewing, she noticed all of her friends' eyes on her. "Huh?"

"It's you," Mike said, holding up the game piece.

She took it from him, and turned it in her hand. "Eleanor?" she asked.

"The Elegant," Will added.

"We thought, maybe sometimes you'd want to play with us," Mike said. "You don't have to, if..."

"This is for me?" she asked, looking at the piece. "Eleanor the Elegant?"

"If you want, yeah," Mike said.

She leapt from her seat next to him and wrapped him in a hug, then gave him a brief but passionate kiss on the lips.

The other boys groaned as the two pulled apart.

"Really?" Lucas asked. "Did you have to do that in front of us?"

"You're just lucky you haven't walked in on them, sitting on her bed, kissing," Will said. The other boys made a face.

"We got you this, too," Dustin said, reaching behind his seat and pulling out a backpack. He put it next to her on the floor.

She looked at it, then up at Dustin. "Thank you."

"Open it up," Will urged.

She unzipped the backpack, and felt tears come to her eyes as she saw what was inside. There was a Supercom, a flashlight, a winter hat, and a notebook-similar to the ones the boys used for their games-with a gothic E on the cover.

"I know Christmas isn't for a few more days," Mike explained, "But we wanted to get you something."

"The Supercom's from me," Lucas said, proud of himself.

"I got you the flashlight," Will added.

"The notebook and the hat's from me," Mike said.

She looked at Dustin. "The backpack's from me," he explained. "Plus, we all got you some Eggo's."

"We couldn't put them in there, they'd melt," Mike said.

Eleven beamed, feeling like she was officially a part of the group. With tears silently going down her face, she thanked the boys as they

all wrapped her in a hug.

The game went on for a few more hours. Although Mike helped her out, Eleven was still confused by the game; the boys told her it would come to her with more practice.

At around 12:30, the game finished. Mrs. Wheeler had agreed to let everyone sleep over, so the group took turns changing in the bathroom and setting up their sleeping bags. Eleven had originally planned on sleeping in the fort, but had chosen a sleeping bag to be like the boys. So as the boys climbed into their separate sleeping bags, Eleven, once changed, climbed into her Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bag.

As the group lay on the floor, Will and Lucas on one side, Dustin in the middle, with Mike and Eleven on the end, sleep slowly overtook everyone. Mike and Eleven, of course, were the last to fall asleep.

Facing each other, Eleven said, "Thank you, Mike."

"For what?"

"Everything," she said.

Mike, feeling sleep beginning to overtake him, mumbled "You're welcome."

She scooted her sleeping bag a little closer, and gave him a lingering kiss that woke him up. Then, whispering, she said, "I love you."

He smiled. "Love you too, El."

She closed her eyes, feeling at peace and at home.

Mike watched her fall asleep with a smile on his face. Everything was as it should be.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for reading. I had a blast writing

this, and I honestly didn't want it to end. I'd appreciate comments if you'd like to leave them. I'll be writing a couple more things in the coming weeks.

Again, thank you.

Only 45 days until season 2....